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Melton: Feds tell just part of story

Mayor confirms some of ex-guard's statement but rebuts other details

KATHLEEN BAYDALA • KBAYDALA@CLARIONLEDGER.COM • OCTOBER 9, 2008

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Mayor Frank Melton agreed Wednesday with some details federal prosecutors spelled out this week during his former bodyguard's plea deal about a 2006 raid on a northwest Jackson duplex - but not how they were telling them.

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Marcus Wright cut a deal with U.S. Justice Department prosecutors Tuesday, agreeing to help with Melton's prosecution on civil rights violation and other charges connected to the police-style raid. In exchange, Wright was allowed to plead guilty to misdemeanor conspiracy and give up his job as a Jackson police detective.

In the hearing, lead prosecutor Mark Blumberg read a narrative of Wright's expected testimony, including that he, Melton and fellow JPD Detective Michael Recio had participated in an illegal raid two

years ago on a Ridgeway Street duplex Melton has maintained was used to sell crack cocaine. The statement also alleged Melton regularly drank Scotch whisky while he conducted his police patrols and included some alleged statements Melton made the night of the raid.

Blumberg said Wright would testify that, after leading a group of sledgehammer-wielding young men in an attack on the house, Melton addressed a crowd of neighbors and asked, "Are there any other houses around here that I need to knock down?" Melton said he did talk to residents that night and said he might very well have said something like that.

"I know for a fact that I did make the statement that I was not going to have this in the city of Jackson," he said. "I did say as mayor I was not going to tolerate that. ... And that is well within my right to say that. 'Are there any other houses in this neighborhood where drugs are being sold?' I'm not embarrassed or upset about this."

In fact, he said he did have several more houses torn down in the Virden Addition neighborhood in the weeks following the Aug. 26, 2006, incident.

"I had City Council approval for those, and that was the difference. It was a procedural error, and I can live with that," he said.

As the remaining defendants, Melton and Recio are charged with violating the civil rights of Evans Welch, a middle-aged schizophrenic with a criminal past who lived in the duplex, and Jennifer Sutton, the owner of the house. Jackson resident Tyrus Adams, a 40-year-old

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commercial driver who lived a few blocks from Ridgeway Street until four years ago, said the government's case against the mayor is "a bunch of crap."

"You've got the crack fiends running out there every day," he said.

Melton denied he was intoxicated the night of the raid. Any slurring of speech or strange behavior was because of the various medications he takes for his bad heart and high blood pressure, he said.

"The medication gives me all kinds of problems. At that particular time, I was in congestive heart failure and had just started taking it," he said. "That's not to say to you that I don't like a little Scotch and water now and then."

Others involved with the events of that night still were processing Wright's plea and statement Wednesday. Part of the statement included details about how the mayor cut his wrist while breaking the duplex's front windows and allegedly lying to then-Police Chief Shirlene Anderson and Deputy Chief Tyrone Lewis about his injuries.

According to the statement, Melton, Wright and Recio agreed to a cover story that Melton cut his wrist while chasing a drug dealer. When asked Wednesday whether he felt lied to, Lewis said he had not reached any conclusions.

"I don't know what to believe right now," Lewis said. "Everything is real confusing."

Anderson had no comment. "I'm not going to tell you anything," she said, before hanging up.

In November, Melton replaced Anderson with Sheriff Malcolm McMillin as police chief, but he created a homeland security position for her at City Hall.

Stanley Alexander, then with the Hinds County district attorney's office, led the prosecution of Melton, Recio and Wright in state court on a variety of felony charges related to the duplex raid, including malicious mischief. He said he hopes the mayor's federal trial, slated for Nov. 12, will be fair.

"To get a fair trial, all the relevant evidence has to get before a jury," he said, adding that did not happen in Melton's state trial in April 2007.

A jury acquitted the three men after a weeklong trial.

Alexander said he had the same details as are in Wright's statement - such as allegations of Melton's drinking and the alleged cover story given to Lewis.

Judge Joe Webster of Clarksdale declared the testimony irrelevant or unduly prejudicial to the jury. But Webster allowed defense attorneys to introduce evidence showing a history of illegal drug activity around the house, which Alexander objected to on the same grounds.

Webster, a special judge in the case, had no comment about his rulings in the trial. "I don't even recall a lot of that," he said.

Alexander said he never got a chance to offer Wright or Recio a deal to testify against the mayor.

"They got together and decided they would stick together and not give state's evidence," he said.

But he said he is not surprised Wright decided to testify this time.

One charge in the federal indictment is possession of a firearm during the commission of a violent crime, which carries a mandatory minimum prison sentence of five years. According to the indictment, the gun in question belonged to Wright.

"He was looking at more time. He had more to lose," Alexander said.

Wright's employment with the city ended Tuesday after his guilty plea, city officials said Wednesday. He had been on a paid leave since the federal indictment in July. Recio remains on paid leave.

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