

NEWS

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Former Pleasantville School Board President and Former
Board Member Sentenced to Prison Terms for Extortion

(More)

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CAMDEN – Former Pleasantville Board of Education president James A. Pressley and former board member Rafael Velez were sentenced today to prison terms of 24 months and 37 months, respectively, for accepting bribes in return for their official assistance in steering public insurance and roofing contracts, U.S. Attorney Christopher J. Christie announced.

U.S. District Judge Jerome B. Simandle also ordered Pressley, 23, to pay a \$2000 fine and to serve three years of supervised release upon the completion of his prison term. In addition to the 37-month prison sentence for Velez, Judge Simandle ordered Velez, 47, to pay a \$4,000 fine and to serve three years of supervised release. Judge Simandle continued Pressley's release on a \$200,000 bond pending his surrender to the U.S. Bureau of Prisons on a date to be determined by prison officials. Velez has been detained in federal custody since violating the conditions of his bail on March 31.

In sentencing Pressley, Judge Simandle noted the defendant's "strong cooperation" with the government, which included Pressley's truthful testimony at the trial of one of his co-defendants. Judge Simandle stated that if not for Pressley's early and complete cooperation with the government, he would have sentenced Pressley to 46 months in prison.

Pressley and Velez were arrested on Sept. 6, 2007, along with nine other public officials and one private citizen, which resulted from a public corruption investigation that progressed from southern to northern New Jersey. Ten of the 12 defendants have either pleaded guilty or were convicted at trial. Defendants Keith Reid, 49, of Carteret, and Jonathan Soto, 33, of Passaic, are awaiting trials that are scheduled for October.

Pressley and Velez pleaded guilty before Judge Simandle on Dec. 10 and Oct. 23, respectively, to separate one-count criminal Informations that charged attempted extortion under color of official right.

At Pressley's plea hearing, he admitted that he accepted three corrupt payments totaling \$10,800 between May 2006 and July 2006. Pressley admitted that he took the corrupt payments in exchange for his official assistance in attempting to obtain Pleasantville Board of Education (PBOE) contracts for a roofing business.

Pressley and Velez both admitted that on Sept. 12, 2006, they and three other members of the PBOE voted to pass a resolution authorizing a contract for insurance services to an insurance brokerage company. Pressley admitted that he accepted corrupt cash payments of \$7,500 and \$17,500 on Sept. 13 and Sept. 21, respectively, in exchange for voting for the PBOE insurance contract. Velez admitted that he had agreed to accept corrupt payments of \$15,000 in exchange for his support of PBOE contracts with the insurance

brokerage business and the roofing business. Velez admitted that on Sept. 28, he accepted a corrupt cash payment of \$4,000 in exchange for voting for the insurance contract.

As part of their guilty pleas, Pressley and Velez agreed to forfeit \$40,800 and \$4,000, respectively, which represents the total amount of corrupt payments that they received.

In determining the actual sentences, Judge Simandle consulted the advisory U.S. Sentencing Guidelines, which provide appropriate sentencing ranges that take into account the severity and characteristics of the offense, the defendant's criminal history, if any, and other factors, including acceptance of responsibility. The judge, however, has wide discretion and is not bound by those guidelines in determining a sentence.

Parole has been abolished in the federal system. Defendants who are given custodial terms must serve nearly all that time.

Christie credited Special Agents of the FBI, under the direction of Special Agent in Charge Weysan Dun, for the investigation against Pressley, Velez and the other defendants. He also credited for their assistance in the investigation prosecutors and investigators with the Atlantic County Prosecutor's Office, under the direction of Prosecutor Theodore F.L. Housel.

The government is being represented by Assistant U.S. Attorneys David A. Bocian of the Criminal Division in Trenton and Christopher J. Gramiccioni of the Special Prosecutions Division in Newark.

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Defense Counsel:

Pressley - Edward J. Crisonino, Esq. Haddon Township

Velez - Michael Huff, Esq. Camden