

Bribery charges dropped against former state rep.

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ROCHESTER — Former Rochester state Rep. Don Leeman says he's happy his "nine months of hell" are over now that felony bribery and witness tampering charges against him have been dropped.

Leeman, 68, a Republican who lives on Olde Farm Lane, was indicted last year on the Class B felonies and also faced a Class B misdemeanor count for allegedly offering a gift to a public officer during an alleged case of voter fraud in the February 2016 state primary.

The trial had been set to begin March 13, although Leeman and the state reached a plea deal on March 8 that dropped the felony charges in exchange for Leeman pleading guilty to the misdemeanor.

As a result of the plea, Leeman was assessed a deferred \$1,200 fine and ordered to complete 200 hours of community service.

During a phone call with Foster's Daily Democrat on Wednesday, Leeman described the felony charges as "totally bogus" and maintained his innocence.

"The whole thing was based on a lie told by one person and that got me in hot water," he said. "I've always had the philosophy that you can say anything about me anytime, anywhere to anybody, as long as it's the truth."

Leeman said he made the gift offer — an alleged donation to the Rochester Housing Authority in exchange for expediting an apartment transfer — in jest, although he agreed to plead guilty because he couldn't categorically state the recipient knew it was a joke.

“In most states, if you say something in jest, you can’t do anything legally, but it seems like in New Hampshire that’s not the case,” said Leeman, who resigned his seat in the House on May 27, 2016, four days before he was arrested on the charges. “The other party seems to need to understand it’s a joke.”

The charges against Leeman stemmed from a February 2016 investigation by the state Attorney General’s Office regarding the location of Leeman’s home.

By law, a state representative is required to live in the ward they represent. At the time, the Republican legislator was representing District 23, which comprises Rochester’s Wards 2 and 3.

The Attorney General’s Office began investigating Leeman for potential voter fraud because he voted in Ward 3 in the 2016 Primary despite having moved to Wellsweep Acres, a Rochester Housing Authority facility located in Ward 6.

Leeman has maintained he didn’t commit voter fraud because his intent was to move back to Ward 2 or 3. He has said he checked in with the secretary of state before voting to make sure he would still be able to vote in Ward 3.

According to an affidavit by Calice Ducey, criminal investigator for the Attorney General’s Office, Leeman had a conversation with a Rochester Housing Authority employee on Feb. 26, 2016, about transferring to an apartment in Ward 2 or 3.

Leeman was told a transfer would take a long time because there was a waiting list. According to the affidavit, Leeman then offered to make a substantial donation to the Housing Authority on behalf of the local chapter of the Knights of Columbus, where Leeman served as a member.

A different, undisclosed plea deal was once on the table, although Leeman rejected it in August 2016 because it involved pleading guilty to the felonies.

“My name is not John Proctor,” said Leeman, referring to the protagonist of *The Crucible*. “I’m not going to plead guilty to something I never did.”

Assistant Attorney General Steve LaBonte, the case’s prosecutor, said the \$1,200 fine assessed to Leeman as a result of March’s plea deal is the maximum penalty allowed by state law.

The fine is deferred for a period of one year. If Leeman completes his 200 hours of community service and stays on good behavior, according to LaBonte, then the fine is suspended for an additional year.

LaBonte said one of the reasons the state agreed to drop the felony charges is because Leeman had “no criminal record whatsoever.”

“As a part of the plea deal, the two felonies were reduced to the single misdemeanor, which I believe in this case was a just outcome,” said LaBonte.

Leeman’s community service will be subject to careful scrutiny by the court, according to LaBonte.

Leeman said he has completed 25 hours of community service thus far with a Maine chapter of the Knights of Columbus. He plans later this week to also begin work with Waban Projects, a Sanford, Maine, nonprofit that offers programs for children and adults with developmental disabilities.

Leeman, who unsuccessfully ran for state representative in the 2016 election, said he plans to run again now that the case is behind him.

“I got some good bills through last year and I was very proud of that,” he said.

“You have to want to serve if you’re going to be in the New Hampshire Legislature. You don’t do it for the money, you don’t do it for the benefits — you do it because you want to try to accomplish something. Hopefully I’ll have a chance to do that again.”