



POLITICS & GOVERNMENT

Former Charlotte Mayor Patrick Cannon pleads guilty to misdemeanor in voting fraud case

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Patrick Cannon with lawyers James Ferguson and Jake Sussman in court on Wednesday. DAVIE HINSHAW
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A 500-mile drive for a 10-minute hearing and a guilty plea may have brought former Charlotte Mayor Patrick Cannon one step closer to his freedom.

On Wednesday, Cannon returned to his hometown for the first time since his imprisonment 16 months ago. For the fifth time in the last two years, the 49-year-old Democrat stood before a judge, this time to say he was guilty of attempted voter fraud when he cast a ballot in the November 2014 election.

Cannon lost his right to vote earlier that year after he pleaded guilty to accepting more than \$50,000 in bribes from undercover FBI agents posing as real estate developers. In October 2014, he was sentenced to 44 months in federal prison.

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But while waiting to be assigned to a detention facility, Cannon cast an early ballot on Oct. 30. He later told his trial judge in the corruption case that he voted out of habit: “The light didn’t come on that day,” he said.

A Mecklenburg County grand jury indicted Cannon that February, three months after he entered a low-security West Virginia federal prison. Voting fraud in North Carolina is considered a felony. But under his agreement with the Mecklenburg District Attorney’s Office, the charge was reduced to a misdemeanor. Cannon’s punishment: a single day in jail that will be woven into what remains of Cannon’s prison term.

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He is scheduled to be released from federal custody in January. Cannon could be assigned to home detention or a Mecklenburg halfway house as early as this summer.

Legal observers said his release schedule was put in potential risk by the voting fraud case. A key element of the voting fraud plea agreement was that it carried no probation, which could have proved an impediment to any early release.

Given the chance to speak in court on Wednesday, Cannon apologized for casting his illegal vote, then thanked Superior Court Judge Robert Ervin for helping arrange the hearing so he could put his latest mistake behind him.

Cannon looked trim and fit in a gray suit that was brought to the courthouse from the closet of his Ballantyne home. The goatee he sported in his last 2014 court visit was gone. He also appears to have lost the weight he added during his last months in Charlotte – when he was said to have fallen into depression and bouts of heavy drinking. In prison, Cannon completed a rigorous substance abuse treatment program that carved a year off his sentence. He told the judge Wednesday that he hasn't touched drugs or alcohol in close to 18 months.

When the short hearing adjourned, Cannon hugged his attorney James Ferguson and waved to a couple who had sat a few rows behind in the courtroom. No members of his immediate family appeared to have been on hand.

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Ferguson said his client was in good health and spirits but introspective, too.

“Prison does that to you – there’s time for a lot of reflection,” the veteran Charlotte attorney said. “You think about what got you there ... you think about what will get

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Cannon was brought to Charlotte by a team from the N.C. Department of Correction. He spent Tuesday night in the Mecklenburg jail. It was unclear when he would make the return trip. A spokesman with the prison system said it would be a week or so before the cost to taxpayers would be known.

Cannon's prosecutor, Assistant District Attorney Reed Hunt, defended the decision to mount the case – "He openly violated the law ... it doesn't matter if it was accidental" – as well as the eventual terms of the plea.

"Every case is different, every circumstance is different," Hunt said outside the courthouse. "We did not give him the deal because he was the former mayor of Charlotte. We had an agreement that was appropriate for the circumstances of the case."



Former Charlotte Mayor Patrick Cannon pleaded guilty Wednesday to a misdemeanor in connection with an illegal vote the convicted felon filed in the November 2014 election. BY DAVIE HINSHAW

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