



The Birmingham News

Member of Larry Langford prosecution team has resigned Athanias was part of corruption unit

Thursday, August 20, 2009

ROBERT K. GORDON

News staff writer

A key member of the Larry Langford prosecution team has resigned from the U.S. attorney's office in Birmingham.

William Athanas was a member of the public corruption unit in the office, handling some of its biggest cases. In recent months, Athanas successfully prosecuted former legislators E.B. McClain and Sue Schmitz.

It's unclear why Athanas left the office with the case against Birmingham's mayor set for Aug. 31. Athanas was at the prosecution table July 30 when Langford co-defendant Al LaPierre pleaded guilty. He resigned shortly after that.

"Bill resigned. He was a good prosecutor. We're going to miss him," U.S. Attorney Joyce White Vance said.

Efforts to reach Athanas were unsuccessful.

The public corruption unit has seen some changes since Vance took over the job in July. Assistant U.S. Attorney Matt Hart asked to be transferred out of the unit chief's job. Vance appointed Pat Meadows as the unit chief.

Assistant U.S. Attorney Lloyd Peebles has taken Athanas' place on the Langford case.

Athanias gained a reputation as a tremendously hard worker, with colleagues saying he often worked on cases late into the night.

"He worked himself all the time," defense lawyer Jim O'Kelley said. "I remember coming in one morning and getting a fax from Bill from the U.S. attorney's office at 2 a.m. He was a tremendous prosecutor. I think the world of him."

Athanias' leaving looms large, former federal prosecutor Ron Brunson said.

"Any time a prosecutor like that leaves a case it will be hard to fill the void," he said. "Bill Athanas prosecuted some of the bigger cases."

Brunson said that doesn't mean the case against Langford is wrecked. The three prosecutors on the case are more than capable, he said.

Athanias' passion for his work exhibited itself in the McClain case. In seeking a 17½-year sentence for McClain, Athanas wrote in a sentencing memo: "Simply put, the reason that public corruption has run rampant in Alabama is because, for too long, those engaged in it had little, if any, concern that their conduct would be investigated, prosecuted and punished."

Athanas also is an imposing physical figure, standing 6 feet 7.

Athanas first came to Birmingham from the Department of Justice to work on a bank fraud case in 2005. He was transferred to Birmingham shortly thereafter.

E-mail: rgordon@bhamnews.com

©2009 Birmingham

© 2009 al.com All Rights Reserved.