

Developer not guilty in North Providence bribery

By MICHELLE R. SMITH, Associated Press

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PROVIDENCE, R.I. (AP) — A prominent developer was found not guilty by a jury on Thursday of paying a \$50,000 bribe to several town councilmen in North Providence to ease the way to build a supermarket.

Richard Baccari and his company, Churchill & Banks, were found not guilty of one charge each of bribery and conspiracy. Baccari smiled and his family and lawyers cried as the jury forewoman read the verdict.

Prosecutors said Baccari paid \$50,000 to three town councilmen in 2009 to ensure that he'd get four votes on the seven-member town council to approve a zoning change. His lawyer on the project delivered the money.

Baccari's defense lawyer, Anthony Cardinale, had argued that the councilmen had held a club over his client's head and extorted him so he would pay. After the verdict, he said the jury believed what he had told them.

"Mr. Baccari was the victim of a shakedown, and was threatened by the loss of an extreme amount of money by these jackals," Cardinale said.

Prosecutors told the jury the conspiracy began in October 2008, when Baccari told former North Providence councilman John Zambarano he would give him \$25,000 if he delivered four votes. Zambarano got fellow councilmen Raymond L. Douglas III and Joseph Burchfield, then the town council president, involved. Another councilman got wind of the scheme and told the FBI, then agreed to work as a confidential informant for them. He insinuated himself into the group and made secret recordings of his conversations with Zambarano, Douglas and Birchfield.

They then voted to approve the zoning change in February 2009, and later that night, Zambarano received the money from Robert Ciresi, Baccari's lawyer. The amount of the money had by then doubled to \$50,000.

Zambarano, Douglas and Birchfield pleaded guilty to conspiracy, extortion and bribery in 2011. Baccari's former lawyer, Robert Ciresi, went to trial and was found guilty by a jury of conspiracy, extortion and bribery. All four are still in prison.

During the trial, prosecutors played recordings of Zambarano sketching out the details of the scheme and saying that Baccari was the one who made the offer. But the defense attacked Zambarano as a pathological liar, and prosecutors themselves called him a liar and a felon.

U.S. Attorney Peter Neronha said after the verdict that he was disappointed, but that the case had to be prosecuted. He said when someone is solicited to pay a bribe, there is only one answer: to refuse to pay it.

"We attempted to hold everyone to account for their role," he said. "On balance, that quest was successful."

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