

Editorial

BYLINE: EDITORIAL, The Clarion-Ledger (Jackson, Miss.)

SECTION: OP-ED; Pg. 8A

DATE: January 15, 2008

Booneville lawyer Joey Langston's guilty plea and former State Auditor Steve Patterson agreeing to plead guilty to corruption charges is hammering home a theme begun last year with a judicial bribery scandal that Mississippi's legal system is in serious need of reform.

In federal court documents, Langston admitted he tried to influence a state judge; Patterson, in a document unsealed Monday, has agreed to plead guilty to conspiracy to commit bribery of an elected official.

On Nov. 28, a federal grand jury indicted prominent lawyer Dickie Scruggs, his son, Zach Scruggs, and law partner Sidney Backstrom, all of Oxford. All have pleaded not guilty to bribery charges.

Lawyer Tim Balducci, who pleaded guilty to the same bribery charges Scruggs now faces, admitted he approached Lafayette County Circuit Judge Henry Lackey in March about taking a bribe in a \$26 million legal-fees dispute involving litigation on behalf of Hurricane Katrina victims.

Lackey contacted authorities and began cooperating with the FBI. Eventually, Balducci told authorities he gave the judge a \$40,000 bribe to rule in Scruggs' favor.

Perhaps as shocking as the charges are the tangled relationships and innuendo among lawyers and judges that point to a too-cozy system.

Leading speculation that there could be more shoes to drop is Balducci recorded on tape as saying, "Over the last five or six years there ... are bodies buried that ... (Scruggs) and I know where ... (they) are."

Names mentioned as involved are among the highest of current and former legal officers, causing widespread concern, cynicism and lack of trust in the legal system.

Some might argue that the indictments prove that the legal system is working.

But so far, the pleas seem more an indictment of Mississippi's judicial system itself.

The scandal reminds of the FBI's Operation Pretense sting in the 1980s that saw dozens of county supervisors plead guilty to corruption, leading to county government reform statewide.

Its closest judicial similarity is last year's federal prosecution of former Circuit Judge John Whitfield and former Chancery Judge Wes Teel, convicted of bribery and mail fraud. Prominent Gulf Coast attorney Paul Minor was convicted of bribery and is serving an 11-year term.

Those trials, too, exposed cozy relationships between lawyers and judges, exacerbated by Mississippi's system of electing judges so that they can legally take campaign contributions from those who appear before them. It's a system that allows giving state lawsuits to politically well-connected campaign donor-lawyers so they can enrich themselves with public settlements.

Citizens must have faith in their judicial system for it to work. Mississippi's judicial system is now under the spot-light. It should be - with an eye on reform.