

State rep pleads guilty to money laundering: AJC 3/18/08

State Rep. Ron Sailor on Tuesday pleaded guilty to laundering what he believed to be \$375,000 in drug money for an undercover officer posing as a drug dealer.

Sailor, 33, a Democrat who represents parts of DeKalb and Rockdale counties, agreed to resign his position in the legislature. Shortly after his arrest three months ago, Sailor admitted his wrongdoing and began providing information for a public corruption investigation.



File photo / AJC
State Rep. Ron Sailor

"It is an active and ongoing investigation," U.S. Attorney David Nahmias said after the guilty plea. Sailor provided "useful information in opening windows into public corruption we were unaware of before his cooperation."

Sailor was arrested by federal agents at a metro Atlanta hotel on Dec. 19, after taking what he believed to be \$300,000 in cash from a drug dealer, who actually was an undercover officer.

Sailor entered his negotiated plea before U.S. District Judge Jack Camp, who will sentence Sailor on May 22. Sailor faces a maximum sentence of 20 years in prison but is expected to get credit for his cooperation with authorities, his lawyer, Bruce Maloy, said after the plea.

Money laundering involves structuring financial transactions to conceal the source of funds.



John Spink/AJC
State Rep. Ron Sailor and his lawyer, Bruce Maloy (right), leave the Russell Building on Tuesday.

"I was desperate for money and in my desperation I did business with a person I believed was a drug dealer," Sailor told Camp in court. "I offered to launder money for this individual to make money for myself to try to get out of debt. ... I have tried to make amends for my conduct."

In a joint statement, House Minority Leader DuBose Porter (D-Dublin) and House Minority Caucus Chairman Calvin Smyre (D-Columbus) said, "Our credibility and trust is all we have, and it's sad when that trust is broken. This is an unfortunate matter where the public trust is broken."

Smyre said he and Porter learned about the plea before the General Assembly convened Tuesday. "It's something that pains all of us," Smyre said.

"I am disappointed in the bad decisions made by Representative Sailor," House Speaker Glenn Richardson said. "The House of Representatives does not condone his actions."

Sailor, a pastor with a masters in divinity from Howard University, got ensnared in the sting beginning Nov. 10 at a metro Atlanta hotel where he met a man named "Jay." Sailor had requested the meeting, according to court records.

"Jay," who led Sailor to believe he was a Florida drug dealer, was actually an undercover officer working under the direction of the FBI.

Sailor told "Jay" he could launder money and had done so in the past, Assistant U.S. Attorney Bill Thomas said during the plea hearing. Sailor offered various ways for laundering the drug money to make it appear it came from a legitimate source, such as wages or salary from a church.

After telling Sailor he wanted to launder drug money, the undercover officer asked Sailor if he was sure he wanted to go forward, Thomas said. Sailor said he did, then negotiated a fee of 10 percent to launder the cash.

During a second meeting an hour later, Sailor took \$25,000 in cash from "Jay," Thomas said.

Over the next few weeks, Sailor deposited a portion of the cash into a SunTrust bank account and obtained a certified check, made payable to the name provided by "Jay," for \$22,000. The check said the money came from Light Center Baptist Church and the money was for contracting work performed by "Jay" at the church—even though no such church actually existed, Thomas said.

Sailor handed over the \$22,000 check on Nov. 30 to the undercover officer, who the following day met with Sailor again and gave him \$50,000 cash in purported drug proceeds.

On Dec. 4, Sailor called and said he had the laundered money and wanted to fly down to Florida to turn it over and get another \$300,000 in cash to launder, Thomas said. Two days later, Sailor caught a flight to Florida and handed over two checks, one for \$15,000 and the other for \$30,000. Both checks bore the notation "business loan" and were signed by a third party, said Thomas, who did not disclose the name of this person,

Sailor and the undercover officer also agreed to conduct a third money-laundering transaction, Thomas said.

On Dec. 19, Sailor met the officer once more at an Atlanta-area hotel where "Jay" handed Sailor \$300,000 in cash he represented was drug money. Almost immediately, Sailor was detained by federal agents. He soon waived his rights, provided a written statement and agreed to cooperate as an informant in the ongoing public corruption investigation.

Nahmias, the U.S. attorney, said Sailor violated the law by "seeking to assist the drug traffickers who sell their poison in our communities." But when confronted by the FBI, Nahmias said, Sailor "decided to do the right thing by admitting his misconduct and agreeing to cooperate regarding potential criminal activity by others."

Nahmias would not disclose the target of the ongoing probe. "All I will say is the following: As Mr. Sailor and others have learned, people in public office who have violated the law and the public's trust should know that their situation will be much better if they come knocking on the FBI's door than if the FBI comes knocking on theirs."

The Atlanta Journal-Constitution reported earlier this month that Sailor had missed 211 of 233 votes on bills, resolutions and procedural matters in the Georgia House this year. In a short interview at the time, Sailor contended that the preliminary findings by the newspaper were inaccurate.

On Tuesday, Nahmias said there was a reason why Sailor missed so many votes: Authorities told him not to vote while he was cooperating in the public corruption investigation.

Federal prosecutors proceeded cautiously with the idea of having a sitting legislator cooperating with authorities. "We wanted to try to minimize any appearance or concern the government was controlling how Mr. Sailor was voting, while he was cooperating," Nahmias said.

Last November, Sailor was among six state lawmakers and former candidates in line to face mega-fines from the State Ethics Commission for repeatedly failing to file campaign and financial reports. Sailor had been late or didn't file 35 reports since mid-2000, commission records showed.

In August, 2007, Sailor was arrested by Gwinnett authorities on a felony fraud charge. The arrest warrant said Sailor bounced a \$1,111 check meant to pay utilities on a house in Gwinnett. Sailor was also charged with driving with a suspended license and failure to appear in court.

Sailor's father, Ron Sailor Sr., was a once-popular WSB-TV newscaster who is now rector of Christ the King Baptist Church in Dacula. In 2005, the lawmaker's brother, Antony Sailor, pleaded guilty to murder in the death of his ex-girlfriend. A judge sentenced Antony Sailor to life in prison in the death of Patrice Edwards, 19.

— Staff writers James Salzer and Mike Morris contributed to this article