

Maple Heights officials say Prosecutor Bill Mason knew about widespread corruption as early as 2001

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John Kuntz, Plain Dealer file

Cuyahoga County Prosecutor Bill Mason is taking criticism after telling reporters recently that he didn't know about widespread corruption in Cuyahoga County government.

CLEVELAND, Ohio -- Prosecutor Bill Mason recently denied knowing about the widespread corruption that has rocked Cuyahoga County government, but officials from one suburb say they provided his office with specific allegations of wrongdoing that were brushed aside.

Mason told [newspaper and television reporters on Sept. 17](#) that he couldn't have known about public officials enriching themselves at taxpayers' expense without being with them when they accepted bribes in hotels, restaurants and parking lots. The prosecutor said he would have investigated the claims if someone had alerted him.

Mason answered his critics a day after former county Auditor Frank Russo pleaded guilty to 21 charges brought by federal prosecutors and two days after Commissioner Jimmy Dimora was charged with 26 corruption counts. Maple Heights officials, who provided information to county prosecutors, were astounded by Mason's statement.

"That's bullcrap," said Mayor Jeff Lansky. "Somebody didn't prep him. The cover-up continues."

A quartet of Maple Heights officials tried exposing school employees who they believed were misusing equipment, personnel and money for personal gain in 1995 -- before Mason took office -- and in 2001 while Mason was prosecutor.

The complaints, submitted in writing both times, included allegations with specific instances in which district employees and some elected officials -- including former board member Santina "Sandy" Klimkowski -- used school accounts at local stores as their own.

Those allegations are similar to parts of the federal charges Klimkowski (who also worked as a top aide to Russo in the auditor's office) pleaded guilty to last year. More than 35 public officials and business owners have pleaded guilty in the area's biggest corruption probe.

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PD fileAssistant county prosecutor Kelli Perk

COLUMBUS, Ohio -- A lawyer in Cuyahoga County Prosecutor Bill Mason's office was hired three weeks after she withdrew from a Parma judicial race in 2007, clearing the path to public office for the candidate Mason supported.

Mason gave a job to Kelli Perk weeks after she dropped out as a candidate for Parma municipal judge. Perk, who works as an assistant county prosecutor in Mason's civil division, said nobody ever asked her to drop out of the contest. A spokesman for Mason said in a written statement that Perk was hired based on her job qualifications.

"In my heart and mind, I did everything for the right reasons," Perk said in a telephone interview. "I played by the rules."

A timeline of the Perk's interactions with Mason's office, gleaned from public records, has raised questions from a Republican lawmaker about whether Mason used his influence to shape the 2007 race for Parma Municipal Court judge. If so, it would resemble at least two similar cases involving other officials that are detailed in the federal probe of Cuyahoga County government corruption.

Federal prosecutors -- who have collected more than three dozen convictions in the massive investigation of bribery and influence peddling -- have uncovered at least two elections in which a challenger to a candidate established in the local Democratic Party was given something of value in exchange for dropping out of a race.

In 2006, Auditor Frank Russo gave a job to a man who ran a sham candidacy to smooth Russo's path to re-election. And prosecutors have described a scheme to deliver an easy victory to Dean DePiero in his 2003 bid to be Parma's mayor.

Federal prosecutors would not say if they are investigating Mason in connection with a 2007 Parma judicial race.

Timeline of Kelli Perk's hiring

Cuyahoga County Prosecutor Bill Mason's hiring of Kelli Perk in 2007 has raised questions about his role in a Parma judicial race that year. Here is the series of events that led to Perk's hire.

Jan. 30, 2007: Mason's political campaign writes a \$100 check to Deanna O'Donnell's campaign for judge. Mason's campaign later lent O'Donnell \$3,000.

February 2007: O'Donnell and Kelli Perk file to run for Parma Municipal Court judge, setting up a primary election in May because there is more than one Democratic candidate.

March 5, 2007: Mason's office posts a job opening in the Ohio State Bar Association Report.

March 8, 2007: Perk sends a letter to Mason's office to apply for the job.

March 13, 2007: Perk interviews for the job with David Lambert, chief of the office's civil division.

March 17, 2007: Perk sends a letter to the Cuyahoga County Board of Elections notifying it of her withdrawal from the Parma judicial race.

April 6, 2007: Mason's office issues a memorandum announcing Perk's hiring.

SOURCES: Cuyahoga County prosecutor's office, Cuyahoga County Board of Elections.

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After Perk dropped out of the race, Deanna O'Donnell, a Democrat who has received campaign contributions and a \$3,000 loan from Mason's campaign, avoided a primary election and went on to defeat Republican Kevin Rumes in the general election.

Rumes said he doesn't know why Perk dropped out or whether her exit affected the election results. But her timing was odd, he said, and people have asked him why she dropped out.

"There's going to be speculation when someone drops out and then has a job at the county," Rumes said.

Perk, a Democrat who had never run for office, said she dropped out because she realized she didn't have the resources to beat O'Donnell, who clearly had the support of local Democrats.

Russo, DePiero and the Parma Democratic Party were among O'Donnell's other campaign contributors in early 2007.

O'Donnell declined to comment on the campaign.

Perk said she applied for the job in Mason's office because she was dissatisfied with her job as a magistrate for the Portage County Common Pleas Court. Her supervisor there, Judge John Enlow, described her as a knowledgeable and bright employee who left on good terms.

Perk said she also wanted the job in Mason's office because she figured working in Cuyahoga County, where she lived, would improve her chances of winning a future election.

She already had decided to withdraw from the judicial race when she interviewed for the job in Mason's office on March 13, 2007, she said. But she didn't officially notify the Board of Elections until four days after the interview, according to public records.



Marvin Fong, Plain Dealer file photoCuyahoga

County Prosecutor Bill Mason

Mason's office announced Perk's hire as an assistant prosecutor in the civil division on April 6 of that year.

Perk, 47, is running this November for a seat in the Ohio House of Representatives against Republican Walton Hills Mayor Marlene Anielski. State Rep. Josh Mandel, who is running for state treasurer, currently represents the cluster of suburbs that make up the House district.

Perk's political aspirations follow a pattern shown by Mason's work force. The Plain Dealer reported in March that nearly [one of every five people Mason has hired](#) since he took office in 1999 either holds a public office or is related to or a friend of other politicians.

Mason's workers hold office in 21 of the county's 59 communities.

While Perk, a daughter-in-law of former Republican Cleveland Mayor Ralph Perk, maintains her hiring in 2007 was above board, one veteran Republican member of the Ohio House said the situation appears to be "just one more example" of the corruption and cronyism federal prosecutors have uncovered in Cuyahoga County.

State Rep. William Batchelder of Medina said Perk's withdrawal from the judicial race and subsequent hiring is too similar to the circumstances of the election Russo manipulated in 2006 -- a scheme that was included in the 21 corruption-related charges Russo pleaded guilty to earlier this month.

Russo also was involved in a 2003 Parma mayoral race in which [a candidate dropped out](#) in exchange for a raise at his county job. According to criminal charges filed last year against former auditor's office employee J. Kevin Kelley, Russo promised Kelley a raise if he dropped out of the race. The contest was eventually won by DePiero, who has not been named in federal documents or charged with a crime. He denied any wrongdoing when the charges against Kelly were filed.

In 2006, Russo arranged for a man to run [a sham campaign](#) against him in exchange for a job. Joe Gallucci, a Republican, entered the auditor's race and withdrew before the election. It was too late for Republicans to replace Gallucci on the ballot and Russo, unopposed, won the election in November. Russo hired Gallucci weeks after the election.

"When [Gallucci] dropped out, he got a job in the auditor's office. This is more of the same," said Batchelder, who is leader of the House Republican caucus. "I would assume most people in Cuyahoga County, at this point, would view that suspiciously. And rightly so."

Mason declined to be interviewed for this story.

His spokesman's statement noted that Perk's job was posted in the Ohio State Bar Association report on March 5, 2007, and online on March 11. Perk applied for the job on March 8. Several candidates were interviewed for the job, Mason's spokesman said. The job required Perk, a graduate of the California Western School of Law, to handle litigation and county transactions. Her personnel file includes multiple letters praising her job performance.

Perk interviewed with David Lambert, chief of the office's civil division. Perk said she told Lambert during the interview that she planned to withdraw from the Parma judicial race. Mason was not involved in the interview process, she said, and nobody suggested she drop out of the race. She said she took a \$6,000 pay cut when she accepted the \$65,000-a-year job.

"I work hard," Perk said. "I'm at work when I'm supposed to be."

[Coverage of the Cuyahoga County corruption probe](#)
[Stories about Prosecutor Bill Mason](#)

Frank Artino III, a former school employee and a member of the group who went to prosecutors, said he has no confidence in Mason or his office.

"How many other things was he not aware of?" he asked.

Mason declined to be interviewed for this story.

His spokesman stressed that Mason was not in office in 1995 when the first claims were made.

Spokesman Ryan Miday added that veteran prosecutors reviewed the allegations in 1995 and 2001 but decided the claims didn't merit charges. And a Republican state auditor and attorney general, along with The Plain Dealer, also received the information and nothing came of it.

"None of the above agencies and these veteran prosecutors found evidence of criminal wrongdoing," Miday said in an e-mailed statement. "The recent indictments came as a result of evidence obtained by wire-taps since 2007 and the subsequent domino effect of criminal prosecutions."

Former Councilwoman Lee Miami said she met with a prosecutor after Mason took office but never heard back.

"They knew about it," Miami said. "I'm pretty upset. The students and residents have been cheated."

Maple Heights residents also complained to prosecutors about the amount of money the school district was paying lawyer [Louis Damiani](#) and questioned his relationship to Klimkowski and her boss, Russo. The suspicions came true.

Federal prosecutors accused Russo of taking more than \$1.2 million in bribes in exchange for giving more than \$21.4 million in commercial real estate appraisal contracts to VAS Enterprises since 1998. A firm of lawyers close to Russo set up the deal. One of them, Damiani, is dead. The two others have pleaded guilty to the scheme, which cost taxpayers about \$9 million in overpayments, according a report done for the county. Klimkowski pleaded guilty to accepting bribes from the appraisal company and to getting free work done on her home by a contractor whom she voted to award contracts to while on the school board.

Federal prosecutors accused her and a school district lawyer of using taxpayer money to buy themselves things, including a pool pump and items from Sam's Club and Gordon Food Service.

Lansky believes Mason might have ignored the allegations to appease Democratic Party officials, including Dimora and Russo. The wrongdoing touched their close aides, Lansky said.

Miday disagreed and said Mason has prosecuted nearly 300 public employees since taking office, adding: "Clearly, allegations of corruption have been brought to this office."

Mason told The Plain Dealer on Sept. 17 that his office has a limited number of investigators and usually receives investigations from police agencies.

The newspaper, however, [reported in May](#) that his office conducted a major probe in 2006 of a nonunion electrical contractor after being contacted by the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers Local 38. Prosecutors did not involve sheriff's detectives until months after the investigation started.

Mason then announced in 2008 that a [Bedford Heights electrical contractor had been charged](#) with the biggest school construction billing scam in Ohio history, one that threatened to put the firm's president in prison for the rest of his life and cost the company more than a half-million dollars in fines.

But 18 months later, all charges were dismissed. The company refunded \$160,000 to two school districts and entered into a diversion program.

The union benefited the most when the nonunion company was indicted and effectively blocked from bidding on public jobs. The group has deep ties to Mason.

Its current president, Walter O'Malley, is the brother of First Assistant Prosecutor Michael O'Malley and disgraced former County Recorder Pat O'Malley -- Mason's former college roommate. The union donated \$18,850 to Mason's campaign between 2000 and 2009 and is often a sponsor at his political events.