

Fired Lee Police Chief Joseph Buffis arraigned on new extortion, fraud charges in federal court

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SPRINGFIELD - Former Lee Police Chief Joseph Buffis on Wednesday denied charges of extortion, money-laundering and wire and mail fraud in U.S. District Court.

Buffis, a 30-year-veteran of the department, was first indicted in an alleged extortion scheme last year in connection with fleecing a police-sponsored Christmas toy fund for needy children, according to prosecutors. He faces a second round of charges after a federal grand jury issued an indictment on Aug. 28.

Buffis pleaded not guilty to all charges in front of U.S. Magistrate Judge Kenneth P. Neiman, with his defense lawyer signaling that he is eager to get to trial.

"My client would like to keep this case going in a forward direction," said his appointed lawyer, Lori Levinson.

Buffis was originally charged with extorting two Lee innkeepers for a \$4,000 "donation" to the Laliberte Toy Fund in exchange for quashing a prostitution investigation, according to court filings, and pocketing the cash.

Investigators with the FBI and Internal Revenue Service continued their investigation into the alleged scheme and contend Buffis had siphoned \$52,000 from the toy fund since 2007.

The charges state law enforcement officials found only one needy family who received a \$250 gift from the fund.

Despite what prosecutors say is a clear paper trail to the contrary, Buffis told Massachusetts State Police investigating the matter in 2012 that 100 to 130 needy children received gifts annually. Buffis added that he and other officers would package toys and hand-deliver them, if necessary.

His next pretrial conference is scheduled for Sept. 30.

Buffis was fired in the wake of the controversy. The Laliberte Toy Fund has been revived under new management within the town, according to The Berkshire Eagle.