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More arrests expected in Prince George's corruption investigation, FBI to conduct searches of more homes, offices in probe

by Cheryl W. Thompson and Henri E. Cauvin, The Washington Post, 10:28 PM EST, November 13, 2010

The arrests Friday of Prince George's County Executive Jack B. Johnson and his wife suggest that a federal investigation of corruption in county government, long a subject of rumor and speculation, is reaching critical mass.

Law enforcement officials familiar with the probe, which is being overseen by the U.S. attorney for Maryland, said more arrests are expected, possibly this week.

Johnson, a Democrat whose term ends next month, and his wife, Leslie Johnson, also a Democrat and newly elected to the County Council, were charged with destroying and tampering with evidence.

They were arrested after Jack Johnson pocketed $15,000 in cash from a developer Friday, the FBI said, and his wife, at home, stuffed $79,600 in cash in her underwear and flushed a $100,000 check down a toilet as federal agents knocked on her door.

Speaking on the condition of anonymity because the investigation is continuing, authorities said the FBI intends to conduct more searches of homes and offices, seeking evidence of graft related to developer contracts. On Friday, agents carried out searches at the Johnsons' home and the County Administration Building.

A spokesman for County Executive-elect Rushern L. Baker III, who has pledged ethics reform, issued a statement Saturday saying that the arrests would not interfere with his new administration's efforts to focus on residents' needs and to clean up county business practices. He has promised to establish an inspector general's office to root out waste, fraud and abuse and to move to end the practice in which people are allowed to contribute to slates of candidates in addition to individuals. Developers are significant campaign contributors.

Exactly where the investigation is focused remains unclear. Rumblings of wrongdoing in the county have been persistent for years, although, until now, Johnson had not been officially implicated in any impropriety.

The investigations that have emerged publicly over the years include:

The FBI, for example, spent many months examining details of a huge development project in

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Greenbelt and its ties to a former County Council member and two of his golfing buddies. In 2008, agents involved in the inquiry obtained search warrants for several homes and offices, including the offices of two of Johnson's top aides.

Another target of an FBI search during the investigation, developer Patrick Ricker, had held a $500-a-head fundraiser for Johnson in 2002. Ricker was involved in the Greenbelt development, which had Johnson's strong backing.

In 2006, The Washington Post reported that 15 friends and political allies of Johnson's had received 51 county contracts worth nearly $3.3 million. Some were paid to advise the county on matters in which they had little experience, and some failed to produce required reports about their work. Johnson said the contractors were "first-class people."

In February, a developer sued Johnson and several other county officials, claiming breach of contract and intentional interference with business relations. The developer said he was asked to make a payoff in exchange for a lease on a county building. The civil case led Maryland's state prosecutor to open an investigation into allegations that elected officials and political operatives tried to extort money from the developer.

The Maryland state prosecutor also investigated two county contracts awarded in 2005 to the chairman of Johnson's campaign committee, according to sources familiar with the probe and two people who appeared before a grand jury.

Prosecutors questioned the grand jury witnesses about the contracts, each for $100,000, awarded in 2003 and 2004 to Wilbert R. Wilson, owner of a Largo technology firm and a longtime friend of Johnson's, the sources and witness said.

The contracts called for Wilson to "evaluate trends in regional, national and global economics" and to "identify market trends and strategies for improvement of economic benefit to county-based businesses." He was required to "furnish a final written report" of his work to the county government.

County officials could produce no memos, reports or other paperwork generated by Wilson, who was chairman of Johnson's "Vision for 2006" campaign committee.

One of the grand jury witnesses, Carolyn Scriber, former director of the county's Office of Central Services, which reviews contracts and purchasing and handles the management of county buildings and vehicles, said she testified that Wilson's 2003 contract was put through without her knowledge or review.

Had she been asked, she said, she would not have signed off on it.

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"There was no measurement, no work product," she said in an interview at the time.

Washington Post reporters Paul Duggan and Chris Hopkins contributed to this article.

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