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News

Four on trial accused in \$1M cocaine bust

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By Ann Zaniewski, Journal Register News Service

Attorneys gave opening statements Thursday morning in the trial of four men accused of conspiracy to deliver more than \$1 million in cocaine.

Andon Filipi, Tonin Prendi, Manjeet Bhattal and David Trevino are facing charges of deliver/manufacture and conspiracy to deliver/manufacture more than 1,000 grams of cocaine, felonies punishable by up to any term of years in prison, including life.

Troy police found more than \$13,000 in cash and 12 plastic-wrapped, 1,000-gram bricks of cocaine in a 2007 Ford Expedition they had pulled over on Interstate 75 near Crooks Road, on March 29, 2007.

Filipi, a 29-year-old who lives in the Chicago area, was the passenger and said the drugs weren't his. Authorities say Prendi, 53, of Waterford Township, had earlier transferred what they believe was the cocaine to the Expedition and was involved in other ways.

Bhattal, 26, also of the Chicago area, rented the Expedition from an airport and is alleged to have had other connections to the defendants.

Trevino's fingerprints were found on one of the kilos of cocaine.

Assistant Oakland County Prosecutor Beth Hand said the defendants were involved in a cocaine trafficking plan that began developing in August 2006. Law enforcement officers had been conducting surveillance on them when Troy police pulled the Expedition over for traffic violations, according to Hand.

The driver of the Expedition, Anthony Gonzalez, struck a deal with prosecutors, pleading guilty in exchange for a sentence of 2 1/2 years in prison. He is expected to testify in the trial against the other defendants.

Defense attorneys argued that their clients have been wrongly accused.

"He is a victim of pre-judgment of police and prosecutors of the state ... He didn't take part in drug-dealing," said Neil Rockind, an attorney representing Prendi, who came to the U.S. from Albania in 2001. Prendi wore a headset in court Thursday as a woman interpreted for him.

Jim Burdick, Bhattal's attorney, said prosecutors have taken innocent acts and spun them into a "web of deceit."

Prendi, Bhattal and Filipi are being tried by one jury; Trevino will have his own jury. Both juries will hear parts of the case simultaneously.

Oakland Circuit Judge Edward Sosnick is presiding over the trial, which is expected to last about three weeks.

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