

# Alleged bribes to former Palm Springs mayor are not too old to be prosecuted, judge says

[Brett Kelman](#), The Desert Sun Published 10:50 a.m. PT Oct. 6, 2017 | Updated 1:05 p.m. PT Oct. 6, 2017

Former Palm Springs mayor Steve Pougnet and developers Richard Meaney and John Wessman were in court for the high-profile bribery case at the Larson Justice Center, Friday, Oct. 6, 2017. Jay Calderon/The Desert Sun

The Palm Springs public corruption case survived its first challenge Friday after a judge rejected arguments that some of the alleged bribes paid to former Mayor Steve Pougnet were too old to be prosecuted.

Riverside County Judge Harold Hopp ruled in favor of prosecutors, but said the statute of limitations arguments could be revisited at a later hearing. Hopp also rejected arguments that sought to lower three of the felony charges filed against Pougnet to misdemeanors.

Friday's hearing featured the first substantial arguments in the high-profile Palm Springs corruption case, which was filed eight months ago but only just began to progress. Pougnet, the former mayor, is accused of accepted \$375,000 in bribes from two developers, John Wessman and Richard Meaney.

Wessman, Meaney and Pougnet pled not guilty on Friday to all charges against them.



Former Palm Springs mayor Steve Pougnet, right, walks into the Larson Justice Center with lawyer Malcolm Segal in Indio, June 30, 2017. (Photo: Jay Calderon/The Desert Sun)

After the hearing, Deputy District Attorney Amy Barajas described the motions as "standard in a case like this."

"This was something we knew was coming and were prepared for," Barajas said. "Now the objective is to push the case forward as quickly as possible, while still giving them time to prepare their case."

"But we don't want this to be something that lingers on the shoulders of the city for years to come," she added.

The bribes allegedly began in 2012 as Wessman sought support for his ongoing downtown redevelopment project. That project moved forward despite Wessman's arrest in February and construction continues today.

Wessman's attorneys have denied that the 2012 bribes occurred, but argued that if they did occur, they happened too long ago to be prosecuted now. Most felony crimes have a three-year statute of limitations, but the clock doesn't start running until the crimes are discovered – or should have been discovered.

That discovery date is what was debated on Friday. Wessman's attorneys insisted that the three-year window began in March 2013 when Pougnet first reported he had accepted money from a development company, Mitchell-Brix, and its owner, Stephen Mitchell.

"The public records are clear," said Malcolm Segal, one of Pougnet's attorneys. "Everybody knew who Mitchell was three years before. Other members of the city council were aware of the relationship. There were public recusals."

Prosecutors say the window didn't begin until August 2015, when they interviewed Mitchell, who allegedly admitted the payments were intended to buy influence, and that money had flowed from Wessman to Meaney to Mitchell to Pougnet.

Richard Meaney, right with face partially blocked, Steve Pougnet, left, and John Wessman, 3rd from the left, appeared in Riverside Superior Court on Friday, May 19, 2017, in Riverside and requested their cases be transferred to the Indio courthouse. (Photo: Richard Lui/The Desert Sun)

Deputy District Attorney Emily Hanks argued that Pougnet had "lied" on his financial disclosure forms, called Form 700s, by "hiding" the fact that the money had actually come from Wessman, and now Wessman's attorneys were attempting to be "rewarded for that deceit."

"It wasn't the fact that Mr. Mitchell was paying Mr. Pougnet – that wasn't what triggered discovery," Hanks said. "What Mr. Mitchell told investigator Chavez was that he was trying to favor curry with the mayor."

"And if you look at Form 700 through Form 700, it never once mentions John Wessman."

The payments were first revealed in the spring of 2015 when The Desert Sun reported that Union Abbey, a completely unknown company, had paid more than \$200,000 to Pougnet. Soon after this report, a public corruption task force began investigating Pougnet in secret. The investigation led to a raid of Palm Springs City Hall later that summer, then the arrests of Pougnet, Meaney and Wessman earlier this year.

The next court appearance will be on Nov. 8.