

Ex-Perth Amboy official Vas to begin trial for alleged illegal campaign contributions

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Matt Rainey/The Star-Ledger

Former Perth Amboy Mayor Joe Vas enters Monmouth County Superior Court prior to a status conference, in this February 2010 file photo.

PERTH AMBOY — During his decades in politics, Joseph Vas rarely ducked a fight.

The ex-Democratic power broker began his 18-year run as mayor of Perth Amboy in 1990 after a scrappy recall effort to oust a longtime incumbent. A decade later, he defeated a sitting state legislator to win an Assembly seat he ended up holding for six years. And in 2006, Vas infuriated fellow Democrats by running against their anointed candidate in an acrimonious and ill-fated bid for Congress.

This week, Vas faces a different challenge in an unfamiliar venue: federal court in Newark. He is charged with accepting illegal campaign contributions and using his power as mayor to rig a land deal netting him nearly \$300,000. Jury selection began Tuesday.

The trial marks a humbling turn for Vas, whose booming voice and 6-foot-5-inch stature long made him a recognizable, and often indomitable, figure in Perth Amboy. He is the ninth state legislator from New Jersey to face trial or plead guilty to corruption charges since 2006.

"What has been remarkable ... has been the persistent willingness of public officials to succumb to temptation, notwithstanding the very public prosecutions," said John J. Farmer Jr., a former state Attorney General and dean of the

Rutgers School of Law.

Vas, who also faces state corruption charges, was indicted along with his longtime aide, Melvin Ramos, in the run-up to the 2009 campaign between former Democratic Gov. Jon Corzine and present Gov. Chris Christie, a Republican and former federal prosecutor.

The state indictment came first, in March last year, charging Vas with illegally billing Perth Amboy for \$5,000 worth of clothing, sneakers, refreshments at his father's funeral, and the tuition for his son's basketball camp. The federal indictment followed two months later.

Vas's lawyer, Alan Zegas, said it seemed as if state and federal agencies were trying to outdo each other in the heat of a gubernatorial campaign. "There was a political contest," Zegas said.

A spokeswoman for U.S. Attorney Paul J. Fishman declined to respond to Zegas' assertions that the charges were political, saying she didn't want to comment while the trial was under way. Vas, 55, faces up to 20 years in prison if convicted of mail fraud and up to 10 years if found guilty of misapplication of public funds.

The Perth Amboy native owned an insurance and travel agency before running for mayor in 1990, vowing to trim an oversized bureaucracy, put more police on the streets and modernize the city's computer systems. During the next two decades, he was credited with spearheading dramatic redevelopment projects, ushering in shops, restaurants and a bustling waterfront to replace remnants of decaying industry.

In 2003, his political stature rose when he was elected to the state Assembly.

But as Vas's influence expanded, his popularity waned. Critics derided him as a vengeful bully. Vas, Perth Amboy's first Hispanic mayor, alienated local Puerto Rican leaders by denying a parade permit in what rivals said was part of a political vendetta.

His mayoral reign ended in 2008, when Vas was suffered a stunning defeat to a political novice, Wilda Diaz. He remained an Assemblyman.

But then came the indictments. Federal prosecutors say while he was mayor, Vas bought a 12-unit apartment building in Perth Amboy for \$660,000. Five months later, he sold it to a contractor for \$950,000. To sweeten the deal, authorities say, he pressed officials to funnel \$360,000 in state affordable housing funds to the contractor.

Weeks after the charges were filed, Vas' allies began pleading guilty. In March 2009, two city officials told a state Superior Court judge they helped Vas spend city money on clothing and other services on himself. Three months later, Ray Geneske, Vas's high school history teacher and one-time campaign manager, admitted in state and federal court that he funneled \$25,000 from a developer into Vas's congressional campaign.

All of them are expected to testify during this week's trial, along with Donald Perlee, who was Vas' city administrator for

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more than 12 years. Perlee has told authorities that he was asked to recruit so-called "straw donors," according to papers prosecutors filed in the case.

"Loyalty to a boss, whether in the public or private sector, only goes so far," said John Weingart, associate director of Rutgers University's Eagleton Institute of Politics.

Staff writer Joe Ryan contributed to this report.

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