

City official wasn't part of Teamsters' Top Chef shakedown, investigation finds

The three-month, \$60,000 investigation conducted by a former federal prosecutor found that a city tourism official gave a "friendly heads-up" to two businesses who were going to see picketing if they hosted Top Chef.



Mayor Martin Walsh, right, appeared on an episode of Top Chef with host Padma Lakshmi and chef Richard Blais.

David Moir / Bravo

By Allison Manning [@allymanning](#)

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A city of Boston tourism official acted on his own and not as part of an extortion scheme when he gave a "friendly heads-up" about planned union protests to two city hotspots scheduled to host the reality show *Top Chef*, a former federal prosecutor hired by the city found.

Attorney Brian Kelly, now of the firm Nixon Peabody, was asked to examine one paragraph of the eight-page indictment issued against five members of Teamsters Local 25, charging them with extortion after they [threatened violence and obstructed filming in June 2014](#) over the show's use of non-union labor.

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The paragraph—disclosing that an unnamed "representative from the City of Boston" called the Omni Parker House and Menton to tell them about the planned protests—thrust Mayor Martin Walsh's administration into the federal investigation of the Teamsters and raised questions about what kind of influence the pro-union mayor may have wielded in this case.

Kelly found that yes, Kenneth Brissette, the city's director of tourism, sports and entertainment, did call the filming locations because he was concerned about how protests might affect their business. But he didn't act at the direction of anyone else in the administration, and not in collusion with the Teamsters.

"That was my main goal," Kelly said Monday as the report was released, "to determine if the people who made these calls were part of any conspiracy to shake down *Top Chef*. We didn't find any evidence of that."

Kelly wouldn't say whether it was a good idea for Brissette, who had been on

the job about a month at that point, to have made those calls.

Reached Monday, Brissette said he couldn't comment and directed a reporter to the city press office. Laura Oggeri, a city spokeswoman, said Brissette was not disciplined and that it is "not advisable for city employees to get involved in any labor or employer disputes."

Walsh, who was interviewed by Kelly, said in a statement that the investigator was given "unlimited" access to City Hall, and that he was "confident in the results of his review."

"This report answers many of the questions that had been raised and concludes that no city employee was involved in any of the illegal activities alleged in the federal indictment," Walsh said.

While Brissette's phone calls about the picketing were what Kelly focused on, his report also showed that when the city found out that *Top Chef* wasn't a union job, officials became concerned about an already-filmed appearance of a pro-union Walsh on a show staffed by non-union crew.

Before running for mayor, Walsh in 2011 was named head of the Boston Building Trades, a group representing ironworkers, electricians, and Teamsters Local 25. Local 25 donated \$14,999 to his mayoral campaign.

One senior staffer was concerned that the appearance could "negatively affect his reputation with labor, one of his chief constituencies," according to Kelly's report.

Conversations were had about whether Walsh could back out of his agreement to be featured. But after a conversation with Sean O'Brien, the Teamsters Local 25 head, they dropped the issue and Walsh appeared on a broadcast of the show.

O'Brien was one of four people who declined to speak to Kelly as part of his investigation. His lawyer, Martin Weinberg, told Boston.com Monday that he made the decision not to have O'Brien talk to Kelly, and that the union head had no issues with Walsh appearing on the show.

Brissette got wind of the planned protests through a local location scout working with Bravo named Derek Cunningham. Cunningham emailed Brissette on June 5, 2014 and told him that the Teamsters had "found" the *Top Chef* film set and were "pissed."

"The phone calls to my cell have started," Cunningham wrote. "I know it's only going to get worse."

Cunningham did not respond to a message seeking comment from Boston.com. He also declined to speak with Kelly.

Cunningham was in touch with Daniel Redmond, one of the Teamsters later indicted, according to emails he sent to Brissette.

On June 9, Brissette made the calls to John Murtha at the Omni Parker House and Barbara Lynch at Menton. Both told Kelly that Brissette hadn't

told them to cancel or threatened them in any way.

The next day, June 10, according to the indictment, *Top Chef* crews arrived at Steel & Rye in Milton to Teamsters using racist and homophobic slurs, threatening violence and chest-bumping workers. Nine cars had their tires slashed.

Kelly's report was released to Boston.com and other outlets after a records request was made for emails and memos about the Teamsters and *Top Chef*.

The inquiry, which began days after the Sept. 29 indictment, cost the city at least \$60,000. Kelly was [paid \\$625 per hour](#).

The case against the five men, John Fidler, Daniel Redmond, Robert Cafarelli, Michael Ross and Mark Harrington, is pending in federal court.

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