

Teamster chief plans to plead Fifth if called

The Teamster chief whose members are charged with extorting a reality TV show in a case linked to City Hall will plead the Fifth if called to testify when the trial of four of his members begins later this month, a federal court filing states.

Martin G. Weinberg, attorney for Teamsters Local 25 president Sean M. O'Brien, declined to comment yesterday on the disclosure made Friday by lawyers for John Fidler, Daniel Redmond, Robert Cafarelli and Michael Ross.

"The issue is premature," Weinberg told the Herald. "It may well be a non-issue since neither side has subpoenaed Mr. O'Brien. Besides, the U.S. Supreme Court has made absolutely clear that the Fifth Amendment is the refuge of the innocent, not just the guilty."

The "Top Chef" trial remains slated to begin July 31 in U.S. District Court.

To date, O'Brien's name has not surfaced among only a handful of witnesses to be publicly identified beyond mere initials. The list does include the Emmy-nominated Bravo cooking show's host Padma Lakshmi, an international model, actress and author.

Fidler, Redmond, Cafarelli and Ross each face up to 20 years in federal prison if convicted of extortion charges alleging they physically and verbally threatened the cast and crew of a June 2014 Boston-area shoot, with one allegedly telling Lakshmi, "I'll smash your pretty face," if they refused to hire Local 25 drivers.

In a December 2015 appearance on Herald Radio's "Morning Meeting," Mayor Martin J. Walsh, onetime head of the Boston Building Trades Council, acknowledged having personally called O'Brien at the time, but would not discuss their conversation. Walsh made a guest appearance on "Top Chef," causing his former chief of operations Joe Rull to raise concerns about political fallout from his pro-labor boss' involvement with a nonunion TV show.

Walsh spokeswoman Laura Oggeri declined comment yesterday.

No one in Walsh's administration has been accused of any criminal wrongdoing. Friday's defense motion seeks to strike evidence from the trial "of extensive phone and email conversations between various employees of the Mayor's office" and others regarding "Top Chef," including O'Brien. The defense argues the conversations are "irrelevant" because they don't involve the defendants, but rather "broader policy issues such as tax credits, labor relations, and political decision-making."