

Jurors hear opening statements in bribery trial of former Mashpee Wampanoag tribe leader

By [Shelley Murphy](#) Globe Staff, Updated April 22, 2022, 6:24 p.m.



Cedric Cromwell (pictured in 2019) is charged with conspiracy to commit extortion, four counts of extortion, conspiracy to commit bribery, and two counts of bribery. JOHN TLUMACKI/GLOBE STAFF/FILE

The former chairman of the Mashpee Wampanoag Tribe doesn't dispute that he received \$50,000 cash and other gifts from an architect overseeing the tribe's efforts to build a \$1 billion casino in Taunton, but there's no evidence the payments were illegal, said lawyers for the two men.

During opening statements Friday in the federal trial of Cedric Cromwell, the former tribe chairman, and David DeQuattro, owner of an architecture firm in Providence, their lawyers told jurors the payments were donations to Cromwell's reelection campaign and gifts, which he accepted without doing anything in return, making them legal.

Cromwell "may be imperfect and he may have made some errors, but he did not participate in a scheme or commit bribery or extortion," his attorney Timothy R. Flaherty told jurors.

"It's not a federal crime to give a large gift," said attorney Martin Weinberg, who represents DeQuattro. "It's part of the DNA of business."

But Assistant US Attorney Jared Dolan told jurors that Cromwell and DeQuattro took steps to conceal the payments because they knew they were bribes aimed at ensuring the tribe would maintain a lucrative contract with DeQuattro's company.

"Opportunity plus greed equals corruption," Dolan told jurors. "The essence of what the government must prove in this case is a quid pro quo, this for that."

[Cromwell](#), 56, who lives in Attleboro and was removed as chairman of the tribe after his 2020 indictment, is charged with conspiracy to commit extortion, four counts of extortion, conspiracy to commit bribery, and two counts of bribery. DeQuattro, 56, of Warwick, R.I., is charged with conspiracy to commit bribery and two counts of bribery. Cromwell faces additional charges of filing false tax returns, which were severed from the case by the trial judge and will be tried later.

Prosecutors allege that Cromwell extorted \$54,000 in cash, a weekend stay at an upscale Boston hotel, exercise equipment, and other gifts from Rhode Island-based Robinson Green Beretta Corp., also known as RGB Architects, through DeQuattro, then a director of the firm, between 2014 and 2017. At the time, Cromwell was serving

as president of the tribe's five-member gaming authority, which paid the company nearly \$5 million under a consulting contract that could be terminated for cause with seven days' notice or for convenience with a month's notice.

Dolan told jurors that the payments and other luxury items were in exchange for Cromwell's protection of the tribe's contract with RGB Architects, which was overseeing all aspects of construction for the casino being proposed on reservation land in Taunton.

Prosecutors say DeQuattro and Joseph R. Beretta, then the company's president and majority shareholder, conspired to conceal the bribes by having DeQuattro use his personal bank account to send four \$10,000 checks and a \$4,000 check to Cromwell, funneling the money through a shell company created by Cromwell and another company belonging to one of Cromwell's friends. DeQuattro was later reimbursed by the company with payments disguised as bonuses or one-time salary increases, prosecutors allege.

Beretta, who resigned from the company in 2019, has been granted immunity from prosecution and will testify for the government at trial.

On Friday, defense attorneys said there is no evidence — not a text, e-mail, or document — that shows any proof of the government's claim that Cromwell did anything in exchange for the payments or threatened to end the tribe's contract with RGB Architects if it didn't pay him.

"The case boils down to a lack of evidence to a large gaping hole at the center of the government's case," Weinberg said. Beretta has a motive to lie, he said, because he has a civil lawsuit pending against DeQuattro, who now owns RGB Architects.

Weinberg told jurors that DeQuattro and Cromwell became friends, and Cromwell made the payments to help him win reelection as tribe chairman and to create "good

will” that might help RGB Architects get contracts with other tribes.

Flaherty told jurors that DeQuattro “empathized with the plight of the Mashpee Wampanoag tribe,” which had battled for years with the federal government to get 321 acres in Mashpee and Taunton designated as a sovereign reservation, paving the way for economic development that would help the tribe.

Cromwell “didn’t pay particular attention to his personal finances” and comingled political donations with other money and used some of it for personal expenses, Flaherty said. But, he said, the tribe, which operates its own government, doesn’t require its members to follow state and federal campaign finance laws.

The tribe began construction of the First Light Resort & Casino in 2016, but the project was halted that year when a federal judge ruled in favor of a group of Taunton property owners who argued that the federal government lacked the authority to designate the land as a sovereign reservation.

The tribe, which has about 2,600 enrolled citizens, was dealt another blow in 2020 when the US Interior Department, under the Trump administration, ordered the land taken out of trust.

In December, the department rescinded that order, restoring the tribe’s control of the land. While that ruling renewed the possibility for a casino on the site, a spokesman for the tribe said last week that the Mashpee Wampanoags are exploring their options and haven’t decided whether to resume the project.

Shelley Murphy can be reached at shelley.murphy@globe.com. Follow her on Twitter [@shelleymurph](https://twitter.com/shelleymurph).

[Show comments](#)

©2022 Boston Globe Media Partners, LLC