

Sheriff Steve Tompkins' lawyer pushes for dismissal of federal extortion charges

By [Sean Cotter](#) Globe Staff, Updated November 18, 2025, 5:34 p.m.



Suffolk Sheriff Steven W. Tompkins (left), emerged from the John Joseph Moakley United States Courthouse after his arraignment on extortion charges in August with his attorney is Martin G. Weinberg. PAT GREENHOUSE/GLOBE STAFF

A lawyer for [Suffolk Sheriff Steven W. Tompkins](#) argued on Tuesday that [a judge should throw out](#) the federal extortion charges against the embattled Tompkins because his actions amounted to nothing more than common political favor-swapping.

“To bring that to a federal crime requires an agreement or promise — otherwise we’re dealing with a hope; creating a hope, creating an expectation” that a favor might be repaid in kind in the future, said his attorney Martin G. Weinberg during a hearing in US District Court in Boston.

“This indictment is saturated with uncertainty.”

The hearing, in which lawyers cited multiple scandals in modern Massachusetts history as case examples of when a crime occurs, came as Tompkins continues to fight [for his liberty and lucrative job](#) as the government advances charges that he [extorted a cannabis company](#) by threatening to revoke a partnership with his office that was central to [the company’s licensing application](#). Tompkins, a 68-year-old Democrat from Hyde Park, is [on leave](#) but still holds the elected post of sheriff in the county that includes Boston.

Prosecutors allege that in addition to forcing a company official to sell him \$50,000 in stock before the venture went public, Tompkins subsequently demanded he be repaid after the value of his shares sank below his initial investment.

[Tompkins has pleaded not guilty](#) and declined to step down as sheriff. A conviction would imperil his pension, and a sentence of jail or prison time would automatically remove him from the \$191,000-a-year job.

On Tuesday, Judge Myong J. Joun took the motion to dismiss under advisement. The judge gave little indication of how or when he’d rule, though he pressed Weinberg on several points.

The judge summarized the allegations this way: “I took care of you. I will continue to take care of you if you take care of me now.” He then asked, “Why is that not a quid pro quo?”

Weinberg countered that there was no commitment — that the allegations describe only a series of favors with no agreement of a tit-for-tat. “That’s not enough,” he argued.

He cited the Boston Calling extortion case of a decade ago, when two Boston City Hall officials were convicted of extortion and then a different judge in the same courthouse threw that verdict out, ruling that the alleged conduct didn't rise to the level of a federal crime.

In considering a motion to dismiss, the judge is not tasked with sorting out which allegations are true and which are not. Rather, the judge must consider whether the allegations taken at face value constitute the crime that's accused.

Assistant US Attorney John Mulcahy argued the government is explicitly accusing Tompkins of wielding pressure from his office to come to agreements over the stock.

"The schemes that this defendant engaged in were schemes to extort," he said.

In Massachusetts, cannabis companies applying for annual licenses need to show how their business will have a "positive impact," especially on communities adversely affected by the nation's war on drugs. For the company in this case, Ascend, that requirement was allegedly met through its partnership with Tompkins involving a program to train and hire people recently released from jail.

This partnership gave Tompkins leverage; without it, according to prosecutors, company officials feared they would not have their license renewed to operate a shop downtown.

Tompkins has served as sheriff since 2013, overseeing the Nashua Street and South Bay jails in Boston and other detention operations in Suffolk County.

At times over his tenure, his influence-peddling has run afoul of the law. In 2015, he paid a \$2,500 ethics fine and acknowledged wrongdoing after he invoked his position as sheriff while asking store owners in Roxbury to remove the campaign signs of his election opponent from their windows.

In the hearing on Tuesday, Weinberg sought to bar any reference to the ethics violations from the case proceedings. To include these civil violations, he said, would be overly

prejudicial.

“It’s just an attempt to burden him with these ethics issues,” the lawyer said.

But Assistant US Attorney Dustin Chao, the head of the public corruption unit, said the fact that Tompkins had been warned about abuses of power is crucial in showing that this isn’t just an innocent mistake.

“As soon as this defendant had a taste of power, he abused it,” Chao said in court on Tuesday. “He was put on notice: This is bad behavior.”

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