

In federal court, Suffolk Sheriff Tompkins acquitted of extortion charges

By [Danny McDonald](#) Globe Staff, Updated September 2, 2026, 6:18 p.m.



Steven Tompkins. ERIN CLARK / GLOBE STAFF/THE BOSTON GLOBE

In an extraordinary turn, a well-known Boston politician emerged smiling at the end of his trial on federal corruption charges, as a jury acquitted Suffolk Sheriff Steven W.

Tompkins of two counts of extortion on Wednesday, concluding a closely watched case centering on the Democrat's dealings with a cannabis company.

Federal prosecutors alleged Tompkins used his position as sheriff to strongarm Ascend Wellness Holdings for money twice — once for early access to purchase \$50,000 worth of stock in the company and later to get his money back after the stock value tanked.

But the case represented a swing-and-miss for the US attorney in Massachusetts, which has successfully [prosecuted multiple](#) local [politicians](#) and [law enforcement](#) officials alike. After deliberating for 3½ hours on Wednesday, the jury rejected the prosecutors' claims and found Tompkins not guilty on both counts.

A relieved and emotional Tompkins patted one of his defense attorneys on the back before embracing some of his supporters in the courtroom after the verdicts.

"I'm feeling jubilant, man," said Tompkins, 69, outside the courthouse in the Seaport after the proceedings. "I'm feeling really good."

Tompkins thanked God, his legal team, and the jury.

"I'm glad that they saw the fallacy of this case," he said. "What I was accused of, I did not do."

The case offered a glimpse of behind-the-scenes wheeling-and-dealing of power brokers in Greater Boston. The prosecution's star witness was Frank Perullo, a cofounder of Ascend who had made his bones locally as political consultant and lobbyist.

Tompkins, a well-known and glad-handing presence on Boston's political scene, has as sheriff run the Nashua Street Jail and the South Bay House of Correction for years. Charged with housing and caring for the incarcerated as a public servant, Tompkins found himself facing the prospect of spending time on the other side of the bars after the federal indictment came down last summer.

The exhibits shown in court over the week-and-a-half-long trial included text exchanges between Tompkins and Perullo, who were once friends. Some exchanges included Tompkins inquiring about when he would claw back portions of his investment in Ascend. Others included jokey banter and expressions of affection between the two. They messaged about grabbing lunch and campaign merchandise.

To obtain a cannabis license in Massachusetts, businesses must lay out plans to promote diversity and to invest in individuals and communities disproportionately affected by previous cannabis prohibitions. In Ascend's case, prosecutors argued the company met its "positive impact" requirement through a partnership with Tompkins on a program to train and hire people recently released from jail.

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

Tompkins had not signed any agreement that would have guaranteed a refund on his initial investment, according to the indictment, but an Ascend cofounder paid him back anyway after the stock dipped.

“Sheriff Tompkins got something that nobody else got: a full refund,” federal prosecutor Lauren Maynard told the jury during closing arguments.

Maynard told jurors they got a “peek behind the curtain” of what corruption looks like.

“He uses his power, he uses his official position to get what he wants,” she said.

But Tompkins’s defense team argued the jail program was not a make-or-break deal for Ascend, saying the company had other measures that would have satisfied the necessary “positive impact” requirements.

Tompkins’s close friend and former boss Andrea Cabral, a former Massachusetts public safety secretary, testified to that earlier in the week. Cabral, a former executive with Ascend, said that if the partnership with Tompkins’s sheriff’s department was withdrawn, it would not have risked Ascend’s state applications.

“Witness after witness told you there was never a risk to the licenses,” said Tompkins’s defense attorney Martin G. Weinberg during closing arguments.

Additionally, the sheriff’s defense lawyers attacked the credibility and trustworthiness of Perullo, a longtime political mover-and-shaker. They argued the prosecution’s case hinged on Perullo’s testimony, which they labeled “uncorroborated.”

Previously in the trial, Weinberg had portrayed Perullo as having “negotiated a cynical exchange” with federal authorities to avoid prosecution.

During witness testimony, Perullo said he was worried that if the plug was pulled on the Suffolk sheriff’s inmate reentry partnership with Ascend, it would mean further delays in getting his retail operation off the ground, possibly slowing the permitting process and complicating the company’s progress on an initial public offering.

Perullo also said he didn’t think the Ascend stock deal with Tompkins “was right.”

“I had never been asked for something that was directly tied to a government action,” said Perullo under oath.

But Weinberg argued that there was no quid pro quo, that Tompkins “never exchanged a benefit.”

“He did nothing wrong,” he said of Tompkins. “He’s not an extortionist.”

The jury concurred with that assessment.

Tompkins faced two counts of extortion. One was tethered to a fear of economic harm. The second was extortion under color of official right, which alleged Tompkins obtained something he knew he was not legally entitled to in return for official acts, prosecutors said.

After the verdict, Weinberg said the jury got it right.

Tompkins, he said, “has his life back.”

“And the people of Suffolk County got their sheriff back.”

After his indictment last year, Tompkins said he would go on leave and designated Mark Lawhorne as the “special sheriff” who would fill his seat on an interim basis.

A spokesperson for Tompkins said he plans to resume his duties as sheriff.

He will come back to an agency battered by scandal unrelated to his federal court case.

Earlier this summer, [the state’s office of the chief medical examiner](#) ruled that the death of an inmate following a fight with staff at the South Bay House of Correction late last year was a homicide. No criminal charges have been filed in connection with that case.

Separately, a Suffolk County sheriff’s correction officer was arrested last year for allegedly trafficking methamphetamine. Another employee was fired last year for allegedly smuggling hundreds of thousands of dollars’ worth of a synthetic cannabinoid to an inmate.

In another case filed last year, a former Suffolk correction officer was accused of raping an inmate. He pleaded not guilty. The case is ongoing, with a jury trial slated for later this month.

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