

How A Nonexistent Bar Unraveled A California Bribery Case

By **Craig Clough**

Law360 (August 11, 2025, 8:55 PM EDT) -- The criminal case against Palm Springs, California, developer John Wessman hinged on a cooperating witness's testimony that Wessman slung an arm around him at a bar called "Bar" and hatched a plan to bribe the city's then-mayor, but there was just one problem with that story.

The bar called Bar didn't exist when the alleged meeting took place in 2012, and this dramatic revelation during cross-examination helped lead to Wessman's acquittal in June on nine counts of bribery and one count of conspiracy, Wessman's defense attorneys told Law360.

Elliot R. Peters of Kecker Van Nest & Peters LLP said he completely surprised the cooperating witness, Richard Meaney, with the fact that Bar was still under construction in 2012, and all of a sudden the prosecution's key witness looked like a liar.

"And so he told the story about a whole conspiracy which began at a meeting that could not have possibly taken place when he said it did," Peters said. "And then he said, 'Oh, it must have taken place at some other place,' and then once you have him backpedaling on what he just testified to, it's not a good day for him."

With no direct forensic evidence, wire taps, emails or texts tying their client to the bribery plot, much of the case relied on the testimony of Meaney, who pled guilty prior to the trial to charges related to the case in exchange for his testimony, said Peters and his co-counsel, Steven P. Ragland of Kecker.

Prosecutors alleged Meaney acted as a middleman by taking payments from Wessman and funneling them to former Palm Springs Mayor Steve Pougnet, but the defense attorneys said they completely destroyed Meaney's credibility and the prosecutors' case along with it.

"He got pretty roughed up, I would say," Peters said.

A 'Real Loose Cannon' Flips

The case began as a federal corruption probe and was taken over by Riverside County investigators in 2016. Riverside County prosecutor Amy Zois did not respond to an interview request for this story.

Ragland and Peters started representing Wessman, now 86, in 2017, the same year he was initially charged in the case before being indicted in 2019.

Before Meaney struck a deal with prosecutors, the entire case against Wessman was based on the theory that the funds Wessman paid to Meaney for consulting and development work were actually bribes that Meaney funneled to Pougnet to help grease the wheels of redevelopment projects between 2012 and 2014.

Prosecutors alleged more than \$200,000 passed from Wessman to Pougnet, and before Meaney struck a deal with prosecutors and agreed to testify, most of the government's evidence against Wessman was that the payments he made to Meaney were too similar to the amount Meaney was later giving the mayor to be a coincidence.

"That was the whole case against Wessman, really, was the money, or the movement of the money," Peters said.

He also said the case "was just about the coincidence — or, they said, 'proof' — of checks and dates and what the checks added up to and how the dates overlapped."

A county judge initially tossed all the charges against Wessman before the Riverside District Attorney's Office appealed and got them reinstated, Peters said.

"We attacked the indictment and the evidence and said there just isn't enough evidence to convict this guy," Peters said.

Pougnet eventually pled guilty in May, just ahead of the trial, to nine counts of bribery by a public official, eight counts of illicit financial interest in public contracts and one count of conspiracy, and no contest to three perjury counts. He received probation in July and did not testify in Wessman's trial.

Meaney pled guilty to a reduced misdemeanor charge in the case and also received probation in July. After Meaney had spent several years as a co-defendant with Wessman, Peters and Ragland said, they found out around 2023 that he had struck a deal and would testify against their client.

Usually when a criminal defense attorney finds out a co-defendant has flipped and will testify against their client, it's bad news, but Peters and Ragland said they didn't see it that way.

"Well, you would think [it was bad news], but actually the second we found out Meaney was testifying for the government, we were licking our chops," Peters said. "One of the biggest worries we had was going to trial with Meaney. It was reported to us that he had a drinking problem, and he seemed to us like a real loose cannon of a person. I was much happier to see him on 'Team DA' than 'Team Defense.'"

The defense attacked Meaney's credibility in multiple ways, which included introducing evidence that, prior to striking a deal with prosecutors, he "was trying to shake down Wessman for money and threatening, if Wessman didn't give him money, he would go to the DA," Peters said.

"And, of course, John Wessman was not going to be blackmailed or give Meaney money in the middle of a criminal case. I mean, that would be insane," he added.

The defense counsel also had to establish that their client's payments to Meaney were for legitimate work and not part of some bribery plot.

Meaney performed a lot of work for Wessman, and the defense tried to establish this with travel records, invoices, emails and other business documents. This included trips to San Francisco, Las Vegas and Phoenix, all of which he billed to Wessman, the defense argued.

"We had explanations for every penny that flowed," Ragland said.

Peters and Ragland also said they established through the testimony of other witnesses that the redevelopment project at the center of the case was popular among city leaders, which poked holes in the prosecution's theory that Wessman needed to bribe the mayor to get the project approved.

"It wasn't like some dirty thing where Palm Springs really got screwed," Peters said. "Palm Springs got saved by this project, and while that wasn't relevant, ultimately, to if they bribed the mayor, it certainly took away the moral high ground that [prosecutors] had that it was some dirty backroom deal to benefit Wessman."

The Bar Called Bar Wasn't A Bar In 2012

Early into her opening statement, Zois told the jurors they'd be hearing testimony from Meaney, but "may not like him" due to his already having admitted to committing crimes. She also told the jury it would hear about how Wessman one night "put his arm around [Meaney] and said, 'You know what, we got to make sure the mayor gets paid.'"

During his testimony, Meaney repeated the arm-slinging story, and said it occurred at Bar in 2012, with the first payment going to the mayor a few months later.

Prior to the trial, the defense team heard tapes of Meaney's conversations with prosecutors, including the part about Bar, and discovered the place did not even open until 2013, Peters and Ragland said.

"We quickly looked into it, this story about Bar, and figured out that it didn't exist," Ragland said. "Any diligent prosecutor should have done the same to test the veracity of the witness who was singing for his supper, and that's one of the many reasons why this [case] should not have been brought."

After Meaney told the jury about the alleged meeting, Peters got him to repeat the story on cross-examination, establishing when he said it took place, and even more vivid details like what kind of table they were sitting at.

"We had spent a lot of time figuring out how to make it as devastating as possible for Meaney," Peters said.

Peters said that after Meaney repeated the details of the meeting, he introduced several certified documents, including Bar's liquor license, that established it did not open until 2013. Because the documents were for impeachment, they had not been previously entered into evidence and caught Meaney and the prosecutors off guard, Peters said.

"He didn't know it was coming," Peters said. "You're allowed to withhold from your trial evidence impeachment evidence, and so we didn't put any of that on our exhibit list. When the prosecutors saw it for the first time, it was right when it was happening."

Ragland added, "As far as how it landed in the courtroom, it was very dramatic. You could hear a pin drop."

Wessman is a man of few words, Ragland said, but when Peters tore into Meaney over the nonexistent Bar, he said Wessman turned to him and said, "This is better than watching 'The Lincoln Lawyer.'"

After the full acquittal of their client, Ragland said, one of the jurors was quoted in local media as saying that Meaney was not a credible witness.

"There were some good, strong, independent-minded folks [on the jury] who could see through the bluster of the prosecutor's case," Ragland said.

"In my view, this case against Wessman never should have been brought," Peters said. "I mean, the feds passed on it, a judge tossed it, but the DA, I think, was enamored of the idea of like, a big white collar thing, and the mayor was involved, and it was sexy and Wessman was a successful developer with money."

--Editing by Marygrace Anderson and Dave Trumbore.

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