

Vernon man, 79, to stand trial in knife attack on his wife. Page 21

On video, Dwek passes cash to ex-Ocean official

Defense attorneys contend payment to Van Pelt was consulting fee, not a bribe

By MaryAnn Spoto
STAR-LEDGER STAFF

The video secretly recorded in an Atlantic City restaurant was grainy, shaky and noisy.

But jurors who were shown the footage yesterday were told the passing of a money-filled envelope from a federal informant to a state assemblyman was either a bribe or a \$10,000 consulting fee — paid in hundred-dollar bills.

The federal informant seen handing

over the money was failed real estate developer Solomon Dwek. It was his second day on the witness stand in U.S. District Court in Trenton in the corruption trial of former state Assemblyman and Ocean Township committeeman Daniel Van Pelt.

Van Pelt was one of 44 people arrested last summer in a federal sting involving alleged political corruption and money laundering. Van Pelt, a Republican, resigned from the Assembly and the township committee a week

after he was arrested on charges of bribery and extortion.

Dwek, the son of a prominent rabbi in Deal, is the government's main witness in the investigation that ensnared rabbis and public officials. He began cooperating with the federal government in 2006 after he was charged with defrauding PNC Bank out of \$50 million. In October he pleaded guilty to the charges.

Prosecutors contend the \$10,000 Van Pelt took from Dwek on Feb. 21,

2009 was in exchange for expediting the permit process for a development project Dwek proposed in Ocean Township. But defense attorneys insist Van Pelt was embarking on a consulting career and accepted the money as a fee for his services.

As Dwek continued his testimony, he and Assistant U.S. Attorney Rachael Honig dissected snippets of the recordings.

"Well, I want to, ah, you know, get you on my team," Dwek is heard telling Van Pelt.

As paper is rustled and a white

envelope appears in front of the camera, Dwek tells Van Pelt, "Little something to start."

Van Pelt then accepts the envelope and says, "Well, I'll hold onto it, but I don't know what I'm going to do with it."

The tape, one of eight audio and video recordings played for jurors yesterday, is the government's key evidence against Van Pelt, a former mayor of Ocean Township.

Van Pelt is cryptic in his conversations with Dwek and several times

SEE TRIAL, PAGE 22

Conflicts, cash woes sideline city culture fest

Portugal Day is off, its founder says

By Victoria St. Martin
and David Glambusso
STAR-LEDGER STAFF

In the midst of a political slugfest, one of the biggest cultural events in Newark has been knocked out.

Portugal Day, an ethnic festival created in 1980 to celebrate Portuguese culture, has become a political hot potato in the middle of a dust-up between two prominent Portuguese community leaders as the city's election season comes to a close.

Organizers said this week the event would be canceled because of a lack of communication between city administrators and dwindling funds. But city officials say fees the organizers are required to pay have been waived for the festival this year.

AN 'IMPORTANT' EVENT

"This is an important cultural event that attracts hundreds of thousands of people, and we're firmly committed to making sure it happens," said Modia Butler, Mayor Cory Booker's chief of staff.

Bernardino Coutinho, 72, founded Portugal Day and said he is also dedicated to making sure the 30-year-old event continues. But the bills have piled up too high, he said.

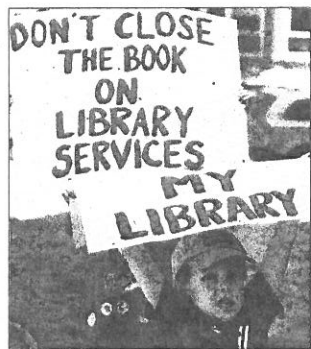
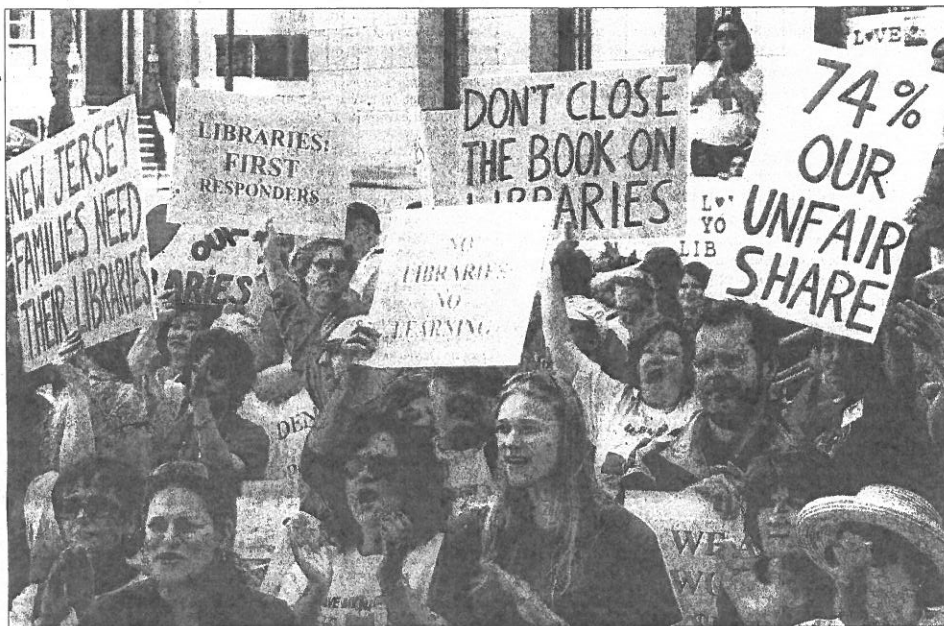
"Since the new laws, I got all that damage," Coutinho said as he pointed to a list of vendors he owes money to.

A 2007 policy asked organizers of all events to pay 80 percent of the city's costs, said Coutinho's son, Assemblyman Albert Coutinho (D-Essex).

Two years ago, organizers said the festival, which brings 500,000 people to the city's Ironbound section, was in danger of cancellation because of the new policy. In 2008, city officials revamped the ordinance, asking organizers to absorb only 20 percent of city costs. The festival was able to continue, with the fee increasing 10 percent each successive year until organizers pay half

"We are keenly aware of the pain that this is causing."

Michael Drewniak, spokesman for Gov. Chris Christie



LIBRARIANS SEE RED OVER CUTS

Above, librarians and library supporters rally outside the Statehouse in Trenton yesterday against funding cuts libraries across the state are facing under Gov. Chris Christie's proposed budget. At left, Trevor Sirak, 5, of Lambertville, lends his voice and placard to the protest. He was accompanied by his sister Paige, 9, and their mother Jennifer Sirak, who serves as a librarian in Lambertville. For libraries and their staffs, budget cuts could undermine key resources for local communities and patrons such as online access. For the unemployed and needy lacking computer access for job searches, the budget cutbacks could be critical and far-reaching, librarians say.

Story, Page 22

PHOTOS BY TONY KURDZUK/THE STAR-LEDGER

Bill would require phone calls that could save a GI's life

By Mark Mueller
STAR-LEDGER STAFF

Army Sgt. Coleman Bean was at home in New Jersey after serving two

and ineligible for treatment from the Department of Veterans Affairs, Bean careened through life, not quite sure how to deal with his fragmenting pain

"This is just a heart-rending case of someone who, in his father's words, fell through

an estimated 11,000 IRR members who have served in Iraq or Afghanistan since 2003.

"Two federal agencies charged with