

Informer testifies in first day of Van Pelt bribery trial

■ The former assemblyman from Ocean County is accused of accepting \$10,000 for a political favor from an informant.

By **DONNA WEAVER**
Staff Writer

TRENTON — Former 9th District assemblyman Daniel Van Pelt's official corruption trial began Wednesday with the prosecution's star witness, Solomon Dwek, testifying on

his own corrupt nature as well as that of New Jersey politicians.

"Corrupt politicians approached me with their hand out, or sometimes I approached them," Dwek told the jury.

Van Pelt, 45, of Ocean Township, is charged with one count of bribery and one count of extortion. Prosecutors say Van Pelt met Dwek on Feb. 21 at Morton's Steakhouse in Caesars Atlantic City. Dwek was posing as a developer who wanted to oversee

work at the Waretown Town Center project in Ocean Township, where Van Pelt was still a committeeman.

At the end of that steak dinner, Van Pelt walked out of that restaurant and took an envelope of \$10,000 cash with him in exchange for his promise to speed up environmental permitting for the project, prosecutors said.

"He (Van Pelt) agreed to use his



VAN PELT

influence as a state and local official, and in February 2009 the defendant had power and influence at the local and state level. He was willing to use that power for a price," Assistant U.S. Attorney Rachael Honig said.

But defense attorney Robert Fuggi told the jury that Van Pelt believed he was setting up a legitimate consulting firm and had even asked the advice of a New Jersey

state attorney about doing consulting work in the township where he had been serving as an elected official.

Fuggi said jurors would hear from witnesses that six months before his meeting with Van Pelt, he had discussed launching the business. Fuggi told the jury that Van Pelt submitted his resignation the Ocean Township Committee on Feb. 3, before accept-

□ See Van Pelt, A9

A.C. SALONS COLLECT CLIPPINGS FOR CLEANUP

Hair gets oily — in Gulf

■ A California organization turns the hair into mats that are used to sop up oil at the scene of industrial accidents.

By **MICHAEL MILLER**
Staff Writer

ATLANTIC CITY — What do two Atlantic City beauty salons have to do with the British Petroleum oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico?

Perhaps a lot, said Denise Rounds, owner of Bellezza salons at Caesars Atlantic City and Bally's Atlantic City.

For the past few months, she has sent hair clippings from her salons to a nonprofit group that turns them into oil-hungry mats that clean up spills. Matter of Trust, a San Francisco-based group, distributes the mats to volunteer groups and environmental agencies that are cleaning up spills.

The charity is focusing its efforts on the Gulf Coast, collecting hair in Fort Myers, Fla., for use as oil booms.

"It's kind of exciting. You feel like you're doing something," Rounds said.

One of her employees, Linwood resident Gina Osbeck, proposed the idea.

"I don't think I have as much of an environmental streak as



Bellezza Salon owner Denise Rounds, of Massachusetts Avenue in Atlantic City, left, and Gina Osbeck, of Monroe Avenue in Linwood, put hair clippings into a bag that will be mailed in 10-pound boxes to an environmental group in California to be used to help clean up oil spills.

Staff photo by Danny Drake

□ See Hair, A6

BP readies huge box to contain leaking oil

■ The 100-ton contraption will be lowered 5,000 feet to the seabed.

By **HARRY R. WEBER**
Associated Press

PORT FOURCHON, La. — A 12-man crew left Wednesday to take a 100-ton contraption 50 miles off the Louisiana coast in an unprecedented attempt to help funnel out oil spewing from the bottom of the Gulf of Mexico.

The giant-concrete-and-steel box is the best short-term solution to bottling up the disastrous oil spill that threatens sealife and

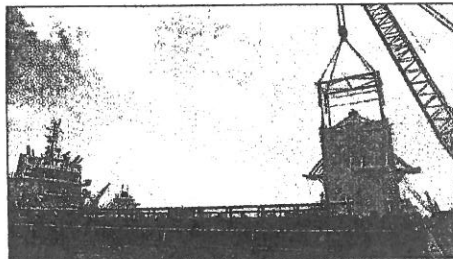
livelihoods along the Gulf Coast.

BP PLC chief operating office Doug Suttles said it would take about two days to put it precisely on the seafloor.

"This hasn't been done before, it's very complex and it will likely have challenges along the way," Suttles said.

Pipes and tubing were to be hooked to a ship over the weekend, and if successful, the oil would eventually be brought to shore. The boat, a 280-foot vessel named the Joe Griffin, began its 100-mile trip around the Mississippi Delta

□ See Spill, A6



Workers in Port Fourchon, La., load a chamber that will be used to help contain oil leaking in the Gulf of Mexico.

Associated Press photo by Patrick Semansky

Merlinos granted casino license

■ The ruling lifts a 21-year ban on their construction company working on resort casino projects.

By **DONALD WITTKOWSKI**
Staff Writer

ATLANTIC CITY — New Jersey gaming regulators finally believe what Joseph N. Merlino and his mother, Phyllis, have been insisting for more than 20 years — that they are not tied to organized crime.

The state Casino Control Commission unanimously approved a license Wednesday that allows the Merlinos and their Bayshore Rebar Inc. construction company to work on Atlantic City casino projects.

Phyllis Merlino, fighting back tears of joy while embracing her son and other family members, said the ruling finally clears their name of any mob taint.

"I'm relieved," she said. "It's finally over."

Joseph N. Merlino said the grueling regulatory battle was well worth it. He maintained that the commission's 5-0 vote vindicated his company and confirmed the Merlinos are simply "a good, hard-working family."

In approving the license, the commission, which serves as the chief regulatory body for Atlantic City's \$3.9 billion gaming industry, lifted a 21-year ban on the Merlinos and Bayshore from

□ See License, A4

EHT girl donates to school district

Egg Harbor Township fifth-grader Emma Klein, 11, is giving all of her yard sale money to the school district to help save extra-curricular activities.

She decided to donate the \$555 toward saving programs and possibly jobs. Emma plans to present the money, which is a wad of bills and some change in a Ziploc bag, Tuesday night at the Egg Harbor Township Board of Education meeting. C3