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Arrests played out like an adagio, while code of ethics is passed

BY DEBRA GRUSZECKI
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HAMMOND -- A drama unfolded Friday outside The Center of Purdue University Calumet while U.S. Attorney Joseph Van Bokkelen told an audience he has zero tolerance for public corruption in Northwest Indiana.

"On some days, I feel like the grim reaper," he said, standing underneath a set of alabaster lights. "But I'm really a nice guy."

His calm belied the activities elsewhere in the region Friday.

While Van Bokkelen addressed the Northwest Indiana Quality of Life Council on the need for ethics in government, federal agents fanned out to arrest six prominent East Chicago officials named in one of two federal indictments. Three other prominent political players turned themselves in to federal authorities Friday as part of the other indictment.

"I came into this office with the perception there was a lack of trust by citizens in Northwest Indiana in their elected public officials," Van Bokkelen said. "That perception was a right of passage, or a cottage industry. The reality, I found, was a lot more complicated than that.

"But the public clearly has a right to know if their public officials are doing their jobs honestly, a right to know someone is watching, if they are not. A little paranoia is not bad in this area."

So, Van Bokkelen said, he reorganized the public corruption task force and gave it a name.

Operation Restore Integrity has eight assistant prosecutors whom Van Bokkelen said he meets with regularly, and whom he said have been busy these days.

"If we find allegations of public corruption, I guarantee you, we will find a way to prosecute it," Van Bokkelen said. He also proposed that the Quality of Life Council and municipalities in Northwest Indiana establish codes of conduct for city and county officials and municipal employees.

Ultimately, a consensus vote was taken to adopt such a code.

Maurice Eisenstein, a political science professor at Purdue University Calumet, lauded the council for taking this step.

"Ethics in a public arena is broader than the question, 'Should I go to jail, or not,' " he said. "What is lacking is behavior without integrity. Citizen expectation has to change."

Carla Miller, an ethics officer in Jacksonville, Fla., who serves as the national chairman of the Council on Governmental Ethics, came to Northwest Indiana with models of programs that already are in place, and with recommendations of steps to take to avoid pitfalls along the way.

Miller said her perception of Northwest Indiana is, "You have an ethical breakdown here."

In Florida, she said, the situation was so bad constituents had no faith in government and that may be because even its own Democratic party chairman was caught on a wiretap telling someone, "Little pigs make it to the trough, big pigs get slaughtered -- you remember that."

"Ultimately, we took the big fish and fried them," she said. "And we decided not to wait for that cyclical, 10-year thing."

Miller said the man who became mayor after the prosecutions decided to have a strong code of ethics written. Miller volunteered for the job.

Now, she said, their community is held up as an example for municipalities and even foreign governments to follow.

Miller said the fact that Indiana has turned to her for help is a first step. "That's the good news," she said. "The bad news is, the reputation of Indiana is not good: The Washington Center for Public Integrity gave Indiana an 'F' grade, and I'd guess that if it had to rate Northwest Indiana separately, it might get an even lower grade."

David Maidenberg, former director of the Indiana State Ethics Commission, said only a handful of municipalities in Indiana have attempted to write a code, so passage of a resolution would be a good first step.

"Not even the state legislature has a functioning system," he said. "These frameworks are like lines in the sand for public officials and employees."

The line drawn in the sand Friday by the Quality of Life Council supports the development and full implementation of ethics ordinances in all municipalities and county governments in Lake, Porter and LaPorte counties.

At a minimum, the codes would ideally include appointment of an ethics officer; required ethics training for all employees and elected officials; an investigatory body to address suspected violation of ethics code; and language to address the issue of ethical infractions.

Ed Charbonneau, executive director of the Local Government Academy, said he believes this is the first step in a long journey.

"Whether or not Northwest Indiana is more ethical than anyplace else is irrelevant," he said. "It makes no difference where we are. There are all kinds of explanations on how we got there. That's the past, and we can't change it."

"A code of conduct would be a wonderful starting point," Van Bokkelen said, as public corruption is a crime his office anguishes over more than any investigation in the office.

"First, it's the complexity of the case. The other thing is, when you go ahead against a public official, you need to be right. Because for public officials, the power to indict is the power to destroy," he said.

"The other thing is, public corruption is a thing that keeps me from getting to other things -- like the kid who is ruffed up by a drug gang so he doesn't get shot."

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