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El Paso Times (Texas)

May 31, 2008 Saturday

FBI inquiry leaves us all scratching our heads

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SECTION: NEWS

LENGTH: 504 words

For a man who knows how to keep secrets, U.S. District Judge Frank **Montalvo** let some interesting stuff out of the bag in the **FBI investigation** of public corruption in El Paso.

Montalvo recently ruled that confidentiality is necessary to protect the investigation, which has lingered like cancer and put El Paso under suspicion since 2004.

The same ruling revealed that this investigation is bigger than we imagined, targeting 80 "persons of interest," including 35 past or current public officials, 13 lawyers, and three current or former judges.

Those of us without all the facts, without the inside track, continue to speculate on what has become the largest **FBI investigation** of public corruption in El Paso history, an investigation that will inevitably touch more people you know in the County Courthouse, the big school districts, El Paso Community College and Thomason Hospital.

"There's nothing to compare it to that I know of," says El Paso lawyer Tom Diamond, a leader in Democratic Party politics for decades and still practicing law in his 80s.

Diamond, like many of us, runs into mountains of conjecture, people always speculating about the case.

"It's casting doubt in everybody's mind about the public officials we have and their conduct," he says. "My concern is that it's based on facts and not just a witch hunt. I have no reason to say it's a witch hunt. I'm just hoping it isn't."

The shenanigans of the recent past seem extremely mild by comparison.

"We were concerned with political maneuverings and chicanery in politics, getting on the speaking platform and telling a bunch of falsehoods, things like that but nothing like this," Diamond says. "This is criminal, if it's true."

The judge's recent ruling seems to suggest public officials in El Paso and some officials in the nonprofit sector may have routinely accepted mordida, payola or whatever you call it. He said the FBI is investigating "systematic" corruption.

You don't have to be a law scholar to guess that so much stuff was being done under the table that just about any public official could have been targeted to be on the take.

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Some of us in this community suspected something was going on. We either looked the other way or assumed it was small potatoes, no big deal that public officials voted a certain way, depending on how chummy they became with those peddling contracts.

The generosity of those trying to influence votes obviously escalated from wining and dining.

The FBI isn't going to chase a public official for accepting a Roscoe's burger. But don't try accepting free plane tickets and fine dining at a luxury hotel in New York City.

Diamond, the aging political warrior, is impatient like most of us, eager for the 12 separate investigations in the case to conclude so that El Paso can move forward.

In the end, more people we know will plead guilty, their reputations tainted forever. Perhaps, public officials and public employees will finally learn what not to do.

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LOAD-DATE: July 18, 2008

LANGUAGE: ENGLISH

GRAPHIC:

PUBLICATION-TYPE: Newspaper

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