

Sludge case had the smell of corruption

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A wful analogies are inevitable whenever a politician goes down for wrangling an underhanded deal involving sewage sludge. A stench of political corruption. A foul miasma hanging over Hollywood City Hall.

But the smell, here, lingers across South Florida. Keith Wasserstrom was a city commissioner who parlayed his elected office into a side job as a lobbyist for a government vendor. That's a rife industry hereabouts. Other elected officials exploit their office, hiring themselves out to private businesses looking to buy clout and win contracts.

OUGHTA BE A LAW

That's unseemly work, disgraceful, and plenty stinky. It ought to be illegal. It isn't.

Wasserstrom's sin -- his criminal behavior -- had to do with deceit. He declared a vague, twice-removed kind-of-maybe conflict of interest.

Actually, he and his law partner (who happened to be the mayor's son) had a secret anything-but-vague financial arrangement with a sewage sludge contractor. The deal was worth \$60,000 a year to the city commissioner.

Wasserstrom was convicted, finally, for filing deceptive conflict-of-interest forms and then working like crazy to make sure his client landed an \$18 million contract that should have gone to the low bidder. In a sense, the jury nabbed him on a technicality. But the jurors knew there was so much more wrong here than a few little lies of omission on a couple of legal forms.

The jurors smelled the political corruption. They saw through the miasma.

It must have been particularly offensive to the jurors, after listening to the convoluted explanation for Wasserstrom's double-dealing, to hear defense attorney Milton Hirsch describe his client in heroic terms. Hirsch suggested that Wasserstrom, in trying to bring Schwing Bioset's sewage treatment process to Hollywood, was "doing God's work."

As if God's work included casting out the low bidder (by \$4 million). No one in the courtroom shouted "Amen!"

In his final argument Tuesday, Hirsch, also made a difficult-to-grasp reference to the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, perhaps a reference to the unknown lobbyist sitting at the defense table. Carried away with himself, or maybe just desperate, Hirsch wished that there had been public servants as vigilant as Keith Wasserstrom checking that doomed freeway bridge in Minneapolis.

POOR ANALOGY

If I was on the jury, the comparison of a deadly bridge collapse to the smell of sewage sludge would have been enough to seal a guilty verdict.

Meanwhile, Wasserstrom's pretty wife and two small not-in-school schoolchildren were situated in the courtroom gallery like props in a politician's defense strategy. There was no need for the heroic public servant and father to take the stand and explain why payment for God's work had to be funneled through a third party.

Mayor Mara Giuliani's combative testimony last week only exacerbated a sense that the criminal charges against the city commissioner were only the detritus of a larger corruption.

The investigation, indeed, had been limited by a series of improbable computer catastrophes that conveniently wiped out crucial e-mail exchanges about Schwing Bioset among the mayor, Wasserstrom, his law partner and his uncle – a business associate who prosecutors said was no more than a patsy go-between for Wasserstrom and Bioset.

What are the odds? All those e-mails just disappeared. The stench was overpowering.