

Reporters Gave Tip on Manafort Storage Unit, FBI Agent Says

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Paul Manafort arrives at federal court in Washington, D.C., on June 15.

Photographer: Zach Gibson/Bloomberg

Prosecutors and FBI agents learned of the existence of a storage locker containing 30 years of business records belonging to Paul Manafort from Associated Press reporters who were investigating him, an FBI agent testified in federal court.

The agent, Jeff Pfeiffer, testified Friday that four AP employees met with a group of prosecutors and agents on April 11, 2017, to discuss the business dealings of Manafort, President [Donald Trump](#)'s former campaign chairman. The news agency later wrote about Manafort's business ties to [Oleg Deripaska](#), a Russian oligarch who's thought to be close to Russian President Vladimir Putin.

Six weeks after meeting the reporters, Pfeiffer said, he interviewed a personal assistant to Manafort who gave him permission and a key to enter the locker and survey its contents. A day later, agents returned with a search warrant and took most of the records, Pfeiffer said at a pretrial hearing in Alexandria, Virginia.

Manafort, 69, who faces a July 25 trial on bank fraud and tax charges, wants a judge to toss out the evidence obtained during that search on the grounds that only

Manafort, not the employee, was authorized to give Pfeiffer his initial entry into the locker. U.S. District Judge T.S. Ellis III said he would decide the matter later.

Judge's Rejection

Manafort made a similar request to suppress the storage-locker search in federal court in Washington, where he's charged with money laundering, acting as an unregistered agent of Ukraine and obstruction of justice. That judge rejected the request last week.

On Friday, Ellis also declined Manafort's request to hold a hearing on whether high-ranking government officials improperly leaked grand jury materials before Manafort was first indicted in October 2017, including in the meeting with AP reporters. Defense lawyers claim that the leaks tainted potential jurors by smearing Manafort.

Defense lawyer Kevin Downing said the solution for such leaks should be dismissal of the case. Ellis rejected that remedy, saying the only other option was moving the trial, such as to one of two cities in the Eastern District of Virginia, Roanoke or Richmond. He indicated that he was still considering whether the leaks were improper and gave Downing until July 6 to make such a request in writing.

An AP spokeswoman issued a statement acknowledging that reporters for the news agency had asked Justice Department personnel whether they knew about Manafort's storage locker.

"Associated Press journalists met with representatives from the Department of Justice in an effort to get information on stories they were reporting, as reporters do," the spokeswoman, Lauren Easton, said. "During the course of the meeting, they asked DOJ representatives about a storage locker belonging to Paul Manafort, without sharing its name or location."

Manafort, whose pretrial release was [revoked](#) this month by the judge presiding over his Washington case, waived his right to attend the proceedings Friday. He is being held at the Northern Neck Regional Jail in Warsaw, Virginia, more than 80 miles south of Alexandria, and asked to be excused from the hearing. His wife, Kathleen Manafort, attended the hearing.

Manafort's Assistant

At the hearing, Pfeiffer said the Manafort employee, Alexander Trusko, ran errands for his boss and drove him around. Trusko, who signed the lease, told Pfeiffer that he moved boxes of records and a file cabinet into the unit from a smaller storage locker and from Manafort's home in Alexandria.

Trusko signed an FBI consent-to-search form that authorized agents to take evidence necessary to the investigation, Pfeiffer said. Rather than remove items,

Pfeiffer photographed the boxes and file cabinet, and cataloged the contents listed on the outside of each box. He then consulted with prosecutors at the Justice Department in Washington and the Eastern District of New York, which was investigating Manafort at the time, he said.

Pfeiffer remained at the locker until the storage facility, which was also in Alexandria, closed that day, he testified. Agents returned the next day -- May 26, 2017 -- with a court-authorized search warrant to remove most of the contents of the locker. Special Counsel Robert Mueller had been appointed nine days earlier to investigate ties between the Russia and the Trump campaign in the 2016 presidential election, and related matters.

Beyond considering the raid on the storage locker, Ellis is also reviewing whether agents properly conducted a search two months later of Manafort's home in Alexandria.

The Manafort cases are U.S. v. Manafort, 17-cr-201, U.S. District Court, District of Columbia (Washington), and 18-cr-83, U.S. District Court, Eastern District of Virginia (Alexandria).

(Updates with AP statement in eighth paragraph.)