



Feds Eyeing Lake House

Rowland Cottage Is Subject Of Subpoenas

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Federal investigators have contacted several contractors who renovated Gov. John G. Rowland's Litchfield cottage - and at least three of them have been subpoenaed to appear before a grand jury to answer questions about what they did at the lakeside home, how much they were paid, and by whom.

The moves by the FBI and federal prosecutors are the first public indication that U.S. authorities are focusing on a matter involving the governor personally - in this case, work done directly for Rowland on his private vacation residence.

Federal authorities have spent the past year investigating whether state officials in Rowland's administration steered millions in state contracts to The Tomasso Group in exchange for bribes. One of Rowland's top staff members has pleaded guilty to participating in the bid-rigging scheme.

Rowland's chief of staff, Dean Pagani, said Monday night that "the governor has not been interviewed" - or contacted - "by the FBI or anyone in law enforcement in connection with work done at the cottage or any other subject matter."

Later Monday night, Pagani called The Courant back with a statement from Rowland.

"Over the past year, we have cooperated fully with the government's investigation," the statement reads. "We have turned over thousands and thousands of pages of documents. I have instructed everyone in my administration to cooperate. I stand willing to continue to cooperate."

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The new subpoenas were issued just days after a Nov. 25 story in The Courant raised questions about renovations beginning in 1997 that transformed Rowland's Bantam Lake cottage from virtually "uninhabitable" condition into a comfortable retreat with a cathedral ceiling, custom pine cabinets, propane heat, a stone patio and a waterside hot tub.

Building permits filed in Litchfield indicate all of the work cost about \$13,500, while sources familiar with the condition of the cottage before Rowland bought it estimated the renovations might have cost at least three times that amount.

Rowland won't answer any questions about the matter because it relates to his personal life, Pagani has said.

At least three contractors or subcontractors on the job were visited or called by FBI agents late last week and subpoenaed to appear in the near future before the federal grand jury sitting in Hartford, according to sources familiar with the probe.

The office of the U.S. Attorney would not confirm or deny that it is investigating the cottage renovations.

Two of the workmen said they were told if they did work at a reduced rate on the governor's cottage, it could lead to state work in the future - which never materialized.

One contractor who worked on the cottage, Christopher Link, owner of Link Mechanical Services in New Britain, has ties to The Tomasso Group, having done work for Tunxis Management, the company's property management operation, on a state project. He calls the Tomasso family "wonderful customers" and says they have referred his company to many jobs.

Link - who took out a permit to do \$4,000 worth of propane heating work on Rowland's cottage - also has worked on the house of Peter Ellef, Rowland's former co-chief of staff who also is under federal investigation. In addition, he worked on the new home of Scott Boos, the project manager for Tomasso on the juvenile school project in Middletown that is part of the federal probe.

Link said Monday that "legally, I can't say anything" when he was asked whether he had been contacted by FBI agents or received a subpoena.

Two subcontractors, Robert Bilodeau Jr. of Bristol and Glenn Lauzier of Winsted, both were contacted in recent days by federal authorities. They both said previously that they were hired by Brian Baker, a contractor from Southington, who is a personal friend of the governor's.

Baker's family runs a religious goods store called Patrick Baker & Sons in Southington. The family also has a construction company, run by Brian Baker, which specializes in church renovations. The company has done work at the Cathedral of St. Patrick in New York City, among others.

Baker took out a license to do regular home renovations just weeks before starting on Rowland's cottage, according to state records. It is unclear whether he has ever done any home renovation work other than for the governor.

Bilodeau and Lauzier told The Courant that Baker indicated that if they did the work cheaply at the Rowland's cottage they would get other state jobs down the road, possibly even at the governor's mansion in Hartford. Both said they have not gotten any state work.

Lauzier built custom pine cabinets for the kitchen and installed a green Formica top, breakfast bar and a new kitchen floor. He was paid about \$4,500. Bilodeau did all of the sheet rocking and painting and estimated it cost about \$3,500.

The \$8,000 for those two jobs matches the amount on the building permit that the governor filed with Litchfield officials indicating what that part of the renovation job, including the new raised ceiling, would cost.

But there were several other expenses, including the cathedral ceilings installed by Baker, new windows and a stone patio out in back.

Baker is not listed as the contractor on the building permit. Last week, he acknowledged he did the work but refused to comment further - saying that "people" had told him not to say anything. He could not be reached Monday for comment.

In addition to how much Rowland paid for the work listed on the permits, there also are questions about work done without permits. A local official said a building permit was required for the outdoor electrical line running down to the hot tub spa, which sits on a wooden deck built near the lake. Also, such spas typically require approval from the Torrington Area Health District, an official there said.

Neither approval was obtained - and because town records indicate no permits were ever taken out, it is unknown who built the deck, installed the hot tub, or put in the outdoor electrical line.

In addition to the \$4,000 value listed by Link on the town permit for his work, and the \$8,000 listed on the building permit for the work by Baker and others, there was a permit for \$1,500 worth of indoor electrical work by Ron Shortell of Astro Electric in Rowland's hometown of Waterbury. Shortell could not be reached Monday night on the question of whether he had been contacted by federal authorities.

A Waterbury-based engineer, Joseph Calabrese, said Monday he had not heard from federal authorities concerning plans he drew for the renovations, including the cathedral ceiling.

Calabrese also had done a drawing in recent years for former state public works commissioner Theodore

Anson, in connection with an addition on Anson's Bridgewater home. Rowland forced Anson to resign in September after it was disclosed that Anson accepted a free set of plans for that addition from the architectural firm Kaestle Boos Associates of New Britain, a major state subcontractor. Calabrese has a long acquaintance with Rowland and state public works officials, and contributed \$2,500 to Rowland's 2002 re-election campaign.

A discussion of this story with Courant Staff Writer Dave Altimari is scheduled to be shown on New England Cable News each half-hour today between 9 a.m. and noon.

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