

# Detroit: Monica Conyers pleads guilty to corruption

Jack Cody  
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Monica Conyers announced Monday her resignation from the Detroit City Council after pleading guilty Friday, June 26, to conspiracy to commit bribery. Conyers is the latest in a string of Detroit Democrats who have either been convicted of felonies, are under federal investigation, or have significant circumstantial evidence linking them to criminal behavior.

In November 2007 Conyers cast the decisive vote in favor of granting a \$1.2 billion waste disposal contract to Texas-based firm Synagro Technologies, Inc. (Synagro). The guilty plea offered by Conyers confirms FBI suspicions that she switched from a “no” to a “yes” vote only after receiving at least \$6,000 in bribes from Synagro.

Conyers resigned amid pressure from several city council colleagues and Attorney General Mike Cox. Cox had indicated, prior to Conyers’s willful resignation, that he would pursue all legal means in his power to have Conyers forcibly removed from office.

Conspicuously quiet on the issue of Conyers’s resignation was Mayor David Bing. Although he did publicly describe Conyers’ conviction as “unfortunate,” Bing did not call for Conyers to step down.

Conyers is now awaiting her sentencing trial, which will take place in approximately three months. Federal prosecutors are pressing for a maximum sentence of five years in prison. Conyers’s attorney, Steve Fishman, says the prosecution’s case is based on an erroneous “benefit-value” of \$1.2 billion, the sum of the contract awarded to Synagro as a result of the bribe.

Fishman will likely claim that the correct figure on

which to base Conyers’ sentence is the \$6,000 bribe she received, which would reduce the maximum sentence to 37 months. Fishman is asking District Judge Avern Cohn to sentence Conyers well below the maximum. In fact, he will make his “best-case argument that she should receive a non-prison sentence.” Reduced sentences for corrupt public officials are common in the American legal system. Former Detroit Mayor Kwame Kilpatrick, for example, received only three months jail-time after being convicted for the misappropriation of millions of dollars in public funds.

Conyers has claimed that her misfortunes can somehow be attributed to her relationship with Detroit political consultant Sam Riddle. The exact meaning of this claim is unclear, as Conyers is being deliberately vague in her public statements. In Conyers own words: “I don’t want to get my judge mad at me.”

Riddle, Conyers’s former chief of staff, has publicly implicated Conyers, US Congressman John Conyers, Jr. (her husband), and the Democratic Party in further instances of bribery and misconduct, separate from the Syangro affair.

Riddle told the *Detroit Free Press* that in 2006, Monica Conyers referred him to a prominent businessman named Jim Papas to hire him for \$20,000. In exchange for facilitating the deal, Riddle said he paid Conyers \$10,000 of the money in cash as a “finder’s fee.” According to Riddle, he was not required to do any work in exchange for the \$20,000.

Papas’s company, Environmental Geo-Technologies, needed federal approval to develop a deep injection well near Romulus. In 2007, Representative John Conyers signed a letter addressed to the Environmental Protection

Agency supporting the project, which was subsequently approved. If Riddle's allegations are true, and in addition Conyers had prior knowledge that his wife had received monetary remuneration from Papas's firm, then John Conyers may have acted in violation of a federal law prohibiting congress members from using their influence on behalf of parties with whom they have financial interests. The FBI stated that Conyers is not under criminal investigation.

Papas has acknowledged hiring Riddle, but said that it was in 2006 and was not related to the deal involving John Conyers. Papas said that he hired Riddle as a consultant, but that he was never able to utilize his services.

Riddle has also alleged that he received \$50,000 in 2006 from the Michigan Democratic Party in exchange for not saying anything negative about Jennifer Granholm, who was at the time involved in a contentious gubernatorial race. Mark Brewer, chairman of the Michigan Democratic Party, acknowledges that his party paid \$50,000 to Riddle, but denies any connection to information Riddle may have had about Granholm. Brewer claims the Democrats paid Riddle for media consulting.

The reality is that the Detroit political establishment, long controlled by the Democratic Party, is mired in corruption and nepotism. Long before Conyers pleaded guilty, Riddle made it clear that if anyone attempted to bring him into the mess, he would act as whistle-blower, exposing any and all information to which he is privy. He now appears prepared to do just that, and the extent of his knowledge may be considerable.

Aside from Monica and John Conyers, and the Michigan Democratic Party, Riddle may have information pertaining to Bernard Kilpatrick (Kwame Kilpatrick's father) and Governor Granholm. Granholm and Kilpatrick both served as governmental appointees in Wayne County (adjacent to Detroit) in the early 1990s under the administration of Edward McNamara.

Bernard Kilpatrick is currently under federal investigation for payments made to his consulting firm, Maestro Associates, LLC, by contractors seeking to do business with the City of Detroit while Kwame Kilpatrick, his son, was mayor. Since investigators questioned Riddle regarding both the \$50,000 in "hush money" he received

from the Democratic Party and the payments made to Bernard Kilpatrick, he may be thought to have information linking Granholm and Kilpatrick.

The revelations leading to Conyers resignation may also be connected to internal conflicts within the Detroit political establishment. All the evidence of corruption that led to the conviction of Conyers for the Syanagro deal can ultimately be attributed to an ongoing federal investigation, stretching back four years, of illegal contracts involving Cobo Center. In early June Karl Kado pleaded guilty to bribing an unnamed "city official" to obtain a contract for renovation work on Cobo Center.

Prior to her resignation, Conyers was part of a bloc within the Detroit City Council that had remained staunchly opposed to any deal in which Detroit would relinquish ownership of Cobo Center, the traditional home of the North American International Auto Show, to a regional authority. The original proposal, strongly endorsed by the current mayor, David Bing, was shot down by the city council in a 5-4 vote.

The state house and senate have both passed revised proposals of the plan that would allow Detroit to retain ownership while leasing the center to a body that would consist of members appointed by the governor, Detroit, Macomb, Oakland and Wayne Counties. Governor Granholm signed the new version of the deal on July 2. Barring opposition from the Detroit City Council, it will go into effect on August 1. In the absence of Monica Conyers, the council is not likely to muster the 5 opposition votes needed to restrict the dealing from becoming active.



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