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John Wiley Price and the Broken Bail Bond Board

The county bail bond board has long let the industry take a county for a ride. You'll never guess who's at the wheel.

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Brandon Thibodeaux



John Wiley Price dominates the board that oversees Dallas County's bail bond industry.

Subject(s):

[John Wiley Price](#), [bail bond board](#)

If the ongoing FBI corruption probe is based on things that have gone wrong with county government, the feds may be in trouble. Really bad things happen at the county on really good days. If you walk into county offices and it looks like the entire psych ward has escaped and gone over to the jail for a party, you know everything's going according to plan.

Whether that helps or hurts Dallas County Commissioner John Wiley Price, the target's main probe, will depend on what else the feds find in those boxes. If they have smoking guns, then, sure, the various messes at the county during Price's 30-year run may make a good corruption case against him.

But if there is no smoking gun, Price could come off looking like the one good guy who's trying to keep order at the nut-house.

A good example is the recent spate of stories about the county's bail bondsmen. *The Dallas Morning News* reported earlier this month that bail bondsmen — people who make money by posting bonds for prisoners so those prisoners can get out of jail — owe Dallas County \$35 million, for all the times their clients have skipped their court dates.

After the *News* published its story, county officials said that even if \$35 million is missing, they could only hope to collect \$6 million. The next day they revised that number downward a bit. The new amount: \$500,000, enough to cover about seven billable hours from the county lawyers.

Price is in the background in this story, because over the years he's aggressively maintained control

and influence over the county's bail bond business. But is that influence a good thing or a bad?

You be the judge.

Last week I chatted with C.W. Archer, a retired sergeant in the Dallas County Sheriff's Department. Archer spent decades in charge of the county jail's bond desk, and he tells me that much of the problem can be blamed on the bondsmen's lobbyists.

A while back, for instance, state lawmakers passed a law allowing bondsmen to write bonds for up to ten times the amount of the cash they put up with the county. So a bondsman puts up his \$50,000 deposit and can write bonds for up to \$500,000. If his bail bond business goes belly-up — and they sometimes do — the county eats \$450,000 in forfeited bonds.

It gets worse. Archer explained another, even slicker way the bond business runs wild: by getting the backing of insurance companies. State law gives any bondsman with an "insurance license" virtual free rein, at no ultimate risk to anyone but the county.

"If you get an insurance license, which probably most of the companies in Dallas County have," Archer said, "then there's no limit to the number of bonds they can write."

It's state law. The sky's the limit.

"The law says that this insurance company is licensed to do business in Texas, therefore it's solvent, and it has no limit," Archer said.

But Archer learned over years of experience — and I learned in an hour online — that there's a big shortcoming in the solvent-insurance-company concept: They're not all solvent.

"When that insurance company goes under, which most of them have, that can look really bad on the computers," Archer said. "There's absolutely nothing that can be done about it."

When the county gets stuck for forfeited bond money, those amounts just stay on the books forever, Archer said. "Nobody wants to be the one who took it off."

But it's not real money. It's not even real debt after a while. It's like the engraving I plan to put on the back of my tombstone for any unfortunate creditors I may leave behind: "We are deeply sorry, but the funds you are seeking are no longer with us."

So does that mean the county is just totally defenseless against the bail bond industry? Sort of. But it doesn't have to be.

I also spent time last week having coffee at a southwest Dallas Denny's with a woman named Beverly Dingess. She used to run the bond forfeiture division of the county clerk's office, one of the many arms of government that have hands in the bond business.

Dingess explained the elaborate system of notifications that are supposed to go back and forth from courts to clerks to the sheriff's department when someone fails to show for court. Almost none of it is truly computerized. It's an old-fashioned system dependent on information being shared by all of the people who need to know.

Part of Dingess' duties involved attending the monthly meetings of the Dallas County Bail Bond Board,

a body created to provide oversight for all this. By law, the board can grant licenses to bondsmen and take licenses away, depending on how well the bondsmen are doing at covering their forfeitures.

Also by law, county officials with bail bond responsibilities are supposed to attend the meetings or send trusted delegates. It's an early warning system designed to alert the county to trouble before a bondsman goes down. Attending the meetings was how Dingess knew whether a bail bondsman's business was in trouble.

"After a meeting I would go back, email the clerk, and tell him that this person is no longer allowed to post bonds," she told me. "It was an information thing. If we didn't know about it, how could it be enforced?"

Dingess did her job for 23 years, but she became collateral damage when Price clashed with former County Judge Jim Foster. It was 2009, and Foster was concerned that Price was improperly dominating and manipulating the bail bond board. So Foster removed Price and appointed himself.

But an hour after he removed Price, Foster says, he learned that Dallas County Clerk John Warren had removed his own appointee, Dingess, and given her seat to Price. And within months, Dingess lost her job with the county in a "reorganization." (She wouldn't discuss that chapter with me. Price didn't return my calls and emails.)

I asked Warren why he would replace his own employee with another elected official, effectively depriving himself of his eyes and ears on the board. In an email, he told me that Price always told him what he needed to know, and he had other adequate channels of information.

"The appointment of Price did not diminish my access and or influence on the board," he wrote. "When my schedule allowed, I too attended the meetings of the board."

Last week, I attended a Dallas County Bail Bond Board meeting. I was hoping to see if what I had heard so often was true — that Price, who is not the chairman of the board, nevertheless dominates it.

The board went about its business, granting new licenses, allowing existing bondsmen to expand and so on. On every item but one, Price made the speeches and the motions. The one time another member made the motion before he could, Price was sure to second it. He was usually the only person to speak at all.

Anybody watching could come to only one conclusion: It doesn't matter who's the titular chairman of the bail bond board. The board belongs to Price.

That disproportionate power, combined with the FBI's wide-ranging interest in him, has folks around the city offering whispered speculation about why Price may be working so hard to keep control over the bondsmen. But the industry hasn't shown up in any of the documents associated with the FBI probe, and there's certainly a good explanation for Price wanting back onto the board. Price and Foster were bitter enemies back then, one board member points out. Price wanted back on the bail bond board because Foster had pissed him off by removing him.

And I will say this. Though Price isn't the chairman and shouldn't be running the meetings, he runs a good one. Everything was smooth and orderly.

So what is it? Is John Wiley Price an evil under-the-table wheeler-dealer who's making a mess of county government for his own illicit purposes? Or does he deserve a medal for showing up for work?

Like the rest of the FBI's investigation, it could be a toss-up for the average juror. We can assume the feds don't want a toss-up. We just don't know what they've got, if anything, to make it a slam dunk.