

Waco divided as siege mounts on 'Fort Feazell'

Indicted DA claims setup

By CHET BURCHETT
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WACO — A line has been drawn in the dirt here, with supporters of indicted McLennan County District Attorney Vic Feazell on one side and those who think he is, as one woman said, "as guilty as a snake" on the other.

Feazell is an ordained Baptist minister in a Bible Belt town boasting the world's largest Baptist university. This is a place where residents could well be expected to shake their heads and cluck at the apparent fall from grace of a high-profile politician.



FEAZELL:
Retribution?

But there's faith in Feazell here, and despite his indictment by a federal grand jury on charges of taking bribes to fix cases, the district attorney retains widespread support among those who believe in his innocence. Many see the accusations as a setup.

Feazell maintains the 18-month investigation leading to his arrest last week was politically motivated, retribution for his criticism of the Texas Rangers' and other law enforcement agencies' handling of confessions given by serial killer Henry Lee Lucas.

Ethics questioned

Almost two years ago, Feazell, 35, was saying Lucas could not have committed some of the killings he confessed to and he questioned the ethics of a special Ranger task force that obtained the statements. His comments — and the Lucas case in general — brought CBS' *60 Minutes* to town to interview Feazell.

But the federal prosecutors who obtained the indictment against Feazell say it's not a setup, that the indictment and upcoming trial — at which Feazell will face a maximum of 90 years in prison and possible fines of more than \$500,000 — will speak for themselves.

The indictment alleges a lengthy series of bribes, deception and fraudulent campaign reports. It lists specific cases, dates and amounts for bribes. It lists cases and specific police agencies Feazell allegedly misled.

But that's not enough to faze supporters of a man who once turned criticism of his office into a bumper sticker promotion.

Visitors screened

Soon after Feazell took office, he transformed what had been an open office, where attorneys and media representatives could wander at will, into a closed operation with a receptionist to screen visitors before they were allowed to pass through a locked door into a secure inner sanctum.

Critics soon were calling the office "Fort Feazell."

Feazell supporters responded with a bumper sticker that told the county to "Support the Fort."

A campaign fund-raiser for the Democrat — he is facing a Republican challenger in November's election after defeating a primary opponent with 60 percent of the vote — the day after his indictment drew what his organization says was more than a thousand supporters.

At the hotdog affair at the fairgrounds, Feazell took the stage and sang his version of "Your Cheating Heart," dedicated, he said, to the federal prosecutors who sought his indictment.

At Ira's Restaurant on Waco Drive, the folks drinking coffee are free with their judgments.

'Big political deal'

"I think it's a big political deal," said Ricky Laughlin, 27. "I think Vic Feazell is a good district attorney. I'll vote for him.

"When you got the Texas Rangers on you, something is going to happen."

Donald Bolridge, a 39-year-old lineman, agreed.

"Seems like they been picking on him awhile. He's the best we had around in a while. He seemed to be fair and honest," Bolridge said.

Eddie Robertson, 37, said he attends church with Feazell, and he believes the case is "a lot of propaganda."

"He stepped on a few toes and now somebody's getting back at him," Robertson said, adding that he believes Feazell will be found innocent.

"Half the people around here say, 'Yeah, if I was on (the jury), I'd find him not guilty.'

"(Jurors) won't know whether the evidence is true or somebody stacked the deck against him," he

said.

But others in town believe Feazell is guilty.

A waiter in a restaurant said he has heard stories about people with driving while intoxicated arrests saying their attorney was a friend of Feazell's and they would get off.

A defense attorney, who didn't want his name used, said he wasn't surprised by the indictment.

"It's the worst thing to happen to the judicial system in this county," he said, predicting that before the case is over, some defense attorneys will lose their licenses.

"It's a black eye" for the community, he said, referring to headlines across the state about Feazell's indictment. He said the story would make national news before the trial is over.

Most people in the legal profession declined comment on the case, but one ranking member of the law enforcement community who declined to be quoted said he will wait until the trial, explaining that if Feazell is guilty he will be the first to ask for imprisonment but he won't believe anything until he sees "proof."

"There are too many coincidences," he said.