

JUDGE PLEADS GUILTY

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Federal officials said a lengthy probe of corruption in Detroit courts was almost over Tuesday after Recorder's Court **Judge Evelyn Cooper** became the ninth person convicted since the investigation began in 1984.

Minutes before her trial was to start, **Cooper**, 47, pleaded guilty Tuesday to taking a \$5,000 bribe in 1984 and income tax evasion. Under her plea agreement, she faces a maximum five-year sentence and \$110,000 fine.

Cooper's plea in U.S. District Court came less than a week after 36th District **Judge Leon Jenkins** was acquitted by a jury of similar charges. The jurors, who deliberated eight days and were deadlocked on a racketeering count on which Jenkins could be retried, said they believed his defense of entrapment.

U.S. Attorney Roy Hayes would not rule out a retrial on the racketeering count, plus four additional counts of mail fraud that are pending. He said a decision would be made this week.

In exchange for **Cooper**'s plea, prosecutors dropped four related counts accusing her of extortion, racketeering and income tax evasion.

"We did everything we hoped to achieve," said Hayes, "which was to get a crooked or corrupt **judge** off the bench and strip her of her law license."

Hayes would not say whether the ongoing investigation was expected to produce any more indictments.

"These cases reflect the unfortunate exception to the rule of outstanding, courageous and honest **judges**," Hayes and two other federal officials said in a joint statement after **Cooper**'s plea. "This investigation is nearing an end and it is important that the public keep in mind that the outstanding reputation of the Michigan judiciary has not been tarnished."

Wayne County Prosecutor John O'Hair said he looks forward to completion of the FBI probe "so that any remaining clouds can be removed by vindication of prosecution. Five years is too long to have this thing hanging over our local criminal justice system."

Cornelius Pitts, who represented both Jenkins and **Cooper**, said **Cooper** pleaded guilty because the government made an offer "that was perhaps too good to refuse."

"When an offer -- as the movie 'The Godfather' showed us -- is made that is perhaps too good to turn down, then you have to make a decision," he said.

"The facts and circumstances, the risks involved and the impact that a trial would have on the defendant and her family were all factors that we considered."

Cooper , who has not been sentenced, left U.S. District Court hastily Tuesday. According to the indictment and court documents, she took \$9,000 in bribes in 1983-85 to erase gambling debts she accumulated during trips to Atlantic City.

In explaining to U.S. District **Judge** George Woods the counts for which she pleaded guilty, **Cooper** said, "I took some money in the case of Kassab Ama that I knew would affect my decision in the case."

Ama, who had been sentenced by **Cooper** to six months in jail and five years' probation for arson, was ordered released in 1984 after his family allegedly gave the **judge** \$5,000. Court documents indicate **Cooper** 's decision was overturned by the Michigan Court of Appeals in 1986, but Ama was never ordered to complete his sentence.

In pleading guilty to evading taxes on \$7,000 in income for 1984, **Cooper** said: "I'm guilty of this because I had the tax preparer prepare my return and didn't give him all the information. I knew it was wrong."

Federal officials said the \$7,000 is the \$5,000 she took for the Ama case and \$2,000 she took from Robert and Athier Rayis, who had been charged with assault with intent to murder and a firearms violation. Robert Rayis was found not guilty and Athier Rayis was sentenced to two years probation and fined \$300 in 1984.

Soon after **Cooper** pleaded guilty Tuesday, the Michigan Judicial Tenure Commission moved to suspend her without pay from her post. She also automatically is stripped of her license to practice law.

"For the benefit of the court, I'm glad it's over with for her," Recorder's Court Chief **Judge** Dalton Roberson said.

Cooper is the second **judge** to plead guilty to charges stemming from the FBI investigation. Last year, 36th District **Judge** William Haley Jr. was sentenced to 10 years in prison after pleading guilty to taking \$7,000 in bribes and income tax evasion.

Hayes called charges by Pitts that the investigation was racially motivated a smoke screen to divert the public's attention from the facts. **Cooper** , Haley and Jenkins are black.

"We are talking about people who accepted the public trust and sold it to the highest or lowest bidder," Hayes said, adding that "the vast majority of **judges** are to be trusted, believed and (are) without stain."

EVELYN COOPER

* Age: 47.

* Occupation: Recorder's Court **judge** .

* Education: A teacher, she attended Wayne State University Law School and passed the bar exam in 1974.

* Experience: Appointed referee of Detroit Traffic Court, now part of Detroit 36th District Court, in 1978. Was elected to Recorder's Court same year. Took bench in 1979. In 1983, appointed executive floor **judge** at Recorder's Court, handling arraignments, overseeing blind draw of cases to other courtrooms on her floor and hearing waiver trials.

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