

LONG ISLAND / CRIME

Singh to play major role in trial of Manganos, Venditto



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Harendra Singh outside the federal courthouse in Central Islip on Thursday, March 8, 2018. Photo Credit: James Carbone

By Emily Ngo

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Harendra Singh once lived large as a well-connected restaurant magnate, hosting Long Island's political elite at his eateries and charitable galas.

He now is a cooperating witness in the federal corruption case against two officials in his orbit: his longtime friend, the former Nassau County Executive Edward Mangano, and former Oyster Bay Town Supervisor John Venditto.

Singh, 59, of Syosset, is the linchpin to the prosecution's case.

"Mr. Singh will testify truthfully about his involvement in the conspiracy," said his attorney, Anthony LaPinta, who also has said Singh is prepared to do so "irrespective of his past relationships with his co-conspirators or their public status."

Singh agreed to cooperate with the government and secretly pleaded guilty in October 2016 to doling out "bribes and kickbacks" to Mangano and Venditto "in exchange for them taking official action in my favor on an as-needed basis."

Mangano and Venditto face charges of conspiracy, bribery and fraud. Mangano's wife, Linda, is being tried on charges including obstruction of justice. Opening arguments are scheduled to begin Wednesday.

All three have pleaded not guilty.

A 25-year friendship

Singh and the Manganos had a friendship that spanned 25 years, stretching back to his early days as a businessman.

Linda Mangano describes her relationship with Singh as that of a “brother and sister,” according to FBI-prepared summaries of her 2015 interviews with investigators.

She would come to benefit from a \$450,000 no-show job with Singh, Singh said. “She was not required to show up for work and no work product was expected from her,” he said, according to the transcript of his plea hearing.

Singh also covered hotel and travel costs for the Manganos to vacation destinations including Marco Island, Florida; St. Thomas; and Turks and Caicos, according to the October 2016 indictment of the Manganos and Venditto.

He bought an ergonomic office chair and massage chair each valued at more than \$3,000 for Edward Mangano, gifted a \$7,000 Panerai Luminor watch to one of Mangano’s sons, and had hardwood flooring installed at a cost of nearly \$4,000 in the family’s home, the indictment says.

The family dined for free at Singh’s restaurants, he said, according to the plea hearing transcript.

Venditto also ate free at Singh’s businesses and received free limousine service, free conference room use and discounted rates for hosting events on Singh properties, Singh said, according to the transcript.

The bribes were in exchange for lucrative county contracts and \$20 million in indirect loans guaranteed by amendments to his concession agreements with the Town of Oyster Bay, Singh said.

Singh on the stand

Singh is expected to take the stand beginning Thursday.

For the prosecution, he could offer up an insider’s look at the abuse of power alleged against the officials, legal experts say.

Defense attorneys are expected to cross-examine him in the trial's second week, and are likely to attack his credibility, portraying him as a criminal who took a plea deal in hopes of lesser penalties, experts say.

"The defense is going to try to find everything they can in his past to paint him as a despicable, lying individual not worthy of trust," said Robert G. Stahl, a criminal defense lawyer with offices in Manhattan and Westfield, New Jersey.

Doug Burns, a former Eastern District prosecutor from Nassau County, said the "cardinal rule" in the government's use of a cooperating witness is "whether or not what they say can be backed up or corroborated by other evidence in the case."

Ellen Yaroshefsky, professor of legal ethics at Hofstra University's Maurice A. Deane School of Law, said: "If the cooperator is the only evidence, then that's a problem."

LaPinta of Hauppauge, Singh's attorney, said, "Much of his testimony will be corroborated by independent evidence."

Mangano's attorney, Kevin Keating of Garden City, already had begun to question Singh's credibility when his guilty plea was unsealed in January as part of a discovery disclosed to the defendants.

"A man who faces decades in prison for his own vast and hidden criminality struck a cooperation deal . . . in a desperate effort to save himself," Keating said at the time.

Venditto's attorney, Marc Agnifilo of Manhattan, said, "As often happens, the government made deals with the guilty to get the innocent."

Linda Mangano's attorney, John Carman of Garden City, declined to comment.

A restaurateur's fall

The transcript for Singh's plea hearing portrays Singh as struggling in the year after his September 2015 arrest on charges including paying a bribe and defrauding the IRS.

Singh said he had been under a psychiatrist's care during his time in a federal detention center and was taking pills that he said "calms me down to sleep."

LaPinta said during the plea hearing that Singh "has suffered significant bouts of depression since the onset of these charges."

The picture was a stark contrast to that of Singh as the gregarious founder of dozens of restaurants stretching from Water's Edge in Long Island City, Queens, to H.R. Singletons in Bethpage and beach concessions in Brookhaven and Oyster Bay.

Singh emigrated from India in 1979 and, upon finding success on Long Island, ran a charitable foundation that purported to raise funds for health care in a rural part of his home country.

The Raj & Rajeshwari Foundation hosted an annual dinner attended by the most powerful local politicians, judges, union leaders and contractors, including Mangano and Venditto.

Singh over the years contributed to political committees and officials whose campaigns in turn held events at his venues.

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