



ESSEX COUNTY

Mayor's friend gets slap on the wrist in tax fraud scheme

Updated 3:43 PM;
Posted 3:04 PM, March 14, 2018

By Thomas Moriarty and Karen Yi

NJ Advance Media for NJ.com

Linda Jumah, a political consultant and close friend of Newark Mayor Ras Baraka, was sentenced to three years' probation Wednesday by a federal judge who cautioned her to stay on the straight and narrow.

Under a plea agreement negotiated with the U.S. Attorney's Office, Jumah in November admitted she cheated the government out of \$40,000 in taxes by underreporting money she earned from her consulting and fundraising business.

Jumah was president of Elite Strategies, LLC which was contracted by the city of Newark and the Newark Community Economic Development Corporation (NCEDC) -- the city's redevelopment arm.

Her partner and chief executive officer of the firm, Kiburi Tucker, later also pleaded guilty to underreporting his income and embezzling money from The Centre, Inc., a nonprofit he ran. Tucker will be sentenced next month.

Addressing the court, Jumah said her choices had not only affected her personally, "but has embarrassed my family."

"I hope I can regain their trust and respect," Jumah said.

Chief U.S. District Judge Jose Linares said he would order a portion of Jumah's probation be served under home confinement, and fined her \$20,000, to be repaid after she makes full restitution.

Linares said that while the charge to which Jumah pleaded guilty carries a maximum potential sentence of five years in prison, federal sentencing guidelines recommended options of six to 12 months of incarceration, probation and/or home confinement.

In asking Linares to avoid imposing prison time, defense attorney Robert Stahl said publicity about her case had already taken a toll on Jumah, who is currently looking for full-time employment that would allow her to make restitution.

Stahl said former New Jersey governor Jim McGreevey -- who sat with Jumah's family in courtroom -- had offered to let her work at the New Jersey Reentry Corporation, the statewide non-profit he runs that helps recently released prisoners find employment.

Assistant U.S. Attorney Jihee Gillian Suh, who handled the case with Assistant U.S. Attorney Jacques Pierre, said that although Jumah had no prior criminal convictions, she had received a disciplinary letter in her file as a state employee and had past brushes with the law.

Linares cautioned Jumah that if she violated the terms of her probation, she could end up being incarcerated on a new charge for the violation.

Most recently, Jumah worked as a manager for Jersey City's Department of Health and Human Services. She was hired in November 2016 and earned \$75,000. After Jumah pleaded

guilty to tax evasion, Jersey City suspended her without pay; she no longer works with the city, a spokeswoman confirmed.

Jumah also helped organize Newark's Afro Beat Fest last July that Baraka resurrected and renamed. It was previously named "Africa Newark" but the annual event stopped in 2006 after it lost city support.

City contracts

Jumah's company, Elite Strategies, was involved with several Newark entities, providing services to the city, Baraka's campaign and the quasi-governmental agency responsible for city redevelopment.

The NCEDC hired Elite Strategies in 2014 for \$111,500, according to a contract obtained through a public records request. The work included \$48,000 to create a media strategy and plan, \$10,000 for publication strategies and \$14,000 for website recommended enhancements. Payments typically ranged from \$200-\$250 an hour, according to the contract.

The contract was signed by the NCEDC's former president, Otis Rolley who was ousted in 2016 amid questions surrounding bonus payments and financial reports. Aisha Glover, who now runs the NCEDC, said the agency does not have any existing contracts with Elite Strategies and has not worked with the consulting company since she took the helm.

Glover added that Elite's contract was competitively bid and the company was picked because it was a local and minority-owned firm within the proposed budget.

The city of Newark also paid Elite Strategies \$26,500 for billboard design, printing services, outreach and other jobs between Sept. 2014 and Dec. 2015. The work was awarded under open market procedures which allow the purchasing officer to solicit bids and select the lowest responsible bidder, a city spokesman previously said.

Elite Strategies helped plan the 2016 Mayor's Ball and other events for Baraka's campaign but is no longer involved.

Baraka said Tucker and Jumah are close friends whom he has known for decades. "They have a company together, they made some errors and they're paying for it," Baraka told NJ Advance Media recently. "Definitely it affects me because they're my friends."

But Baraka said their actions were unrelated to city governance. "It had nothing to do with the functioning of the city, the management of the city. It has nothing to do with the functioning of the campaign, the management of the campaign," he said. "It has absolutely nothing to do with things that are happening in Newark."

"It's their own money, it's their own business," he added.

The Committee to Re-Elect Ras Baraka paid Elite Strategies \$95,000 between April 2015 through April 2017 for consulting services and coordinating a fundraiser, records filed with the New Jersey Election Law Enforcement Commission show.

Jumah also made a \$500 contribution to The Committee to Re-Elect Ras J Baraka 2018 in September.

*Karen Yi may be reached at **kyi@njadvancemedia.com**. Follow her on Twitter at **@karen_yi** or on **Facebook**.*