Eversole's funds dwindling away

As commissioner's retrial nears, he's spent $1.1 million on legal bills

By MIKE MORRIS

Harris County Commissioner Jerry Eversole has racked up $1.1 million in legal bills fighting a federal corruption probe in the past two years, nearly exhausting his campaign funds months before his case is to be retried.

Campaign finance reports show Eversole has $51,000 left in the bank after paying $1.1 million to defense lawyer Rusty Hardin's firm. Eversole, a commissioner for 20 years, has raised just $60 this year and says he's not sure how he will pay for his trial.

"I really and truly don't have any idea what I'm going to do," Eversole said. "I know I'm planning on going to trial on Oct. 24. By what means I'm going to pay for that, I don't know.

"If I'm going to have to work the rest of my life to pay off Rusty Hardin, that's what I'll do.

"I don't have a great deal of finances or, really, the ability to raise finances in the circumstances that I'm in," Eversole continued.

Hung jury in March

The commissioner's first trial ended in a hung jury March 30.

As recently as December 2009, Eversole — who represents more than 1 million people in north Harris County - had $1.5 million in campaign cash.

He is to be tried this fall alongside Mike Surface, a real estate developer who prosecutors allege bribed Eversole with more than $100,000 in gifts and travel in exchange for lucrative county contracts.

Hardin said Eversole's finances will have no effect on the case.

"I am never going to bail on Jerry because of his financial situation, and I'm totally comfortable that he will always do everything he can to pay whatever debts he incurs," Hardin said. "We're in it with him for the long haul, regardless of his financial situation."

Eversole was adamantly that a lack of cash would not lead him to seek a plea agreement with prosecutors.
"I am not going to deal with people who think I have committed a felony," he said. "It's just not going to happen."

His attorney agreed.

"I'm not going to let that happen - I wouldn't allow it," Hardin said. "We are not going to be making decisions in this case based on his financial situation."

Eversole said he has not been contacted by prosecutors and does not anticipate hearing from them before the trial.

'I'll pay for it'

Sandra Guerra Thompson, a professor at the University of Houston Law Center, said defendants short on cash typically find other means of paying their lawyers.

"There are usually other assets that can be signed over and that sort of thing," said Thompson. "It's not unusual for families to put their homes up in order to get really high-priced lawyers."

Eversole ruled out that approach, however.

"I am not going to break my family to pay for my problems," he said. "I'll go to work and I'll get a job and I'll pay for it."