

# Nessel: Chatfield Case May Be Left To Successor

As Attorney General Dana NESSEL announced the latest charges against a former lawmaker, she acknowledged that its ultimate conclusion might depend on her successor.

Nessel said holding elected officials or those who engage in corrupt acts has been a priority for her office, citing prior cases of former Macomb County prosecutor Eric SMITH, former Southfield clerk Sherikia HAWKINS, the alternative slate of electors' case and fraudulent signature cases that led to Republican gubernatorial candidates being kept off the ballot (See "Ex-Macomb Co. Prosecutor Gets 1 Year Behind Bars," 9/13/23 and "Southfield Clerk Resigns Following Plea Agreement," 10/20/22).

"Public integrity matters," Nessel said during a Tuesday press conference. "But I am approximately two years and eight months away from leaving office and the next attorney general may not prioritize these cases as I have done."

Matthew SCHNEIDER, a partner with Honigman and former U.S. Attorney General, said whether the next AG is a Democrat or Republican, Nessel's successor "will certainly" review the pending cases, which is not unusual.

"Dana Nessel reviewed Bill SCHUETTE's past cases when she entered office. I reviewed the past federal cases after taking over from former U.S. Attorney Barb McQUADE," he said. "That's expected. It's also expected – at least we hope it is – that an incoming AG would not pre-judge any case before fully understanding the evidence behind it."

Schneider envisions the criminal case against former House Speaker Lee CHATFIELD and his wife, Stephanie CHATFIELD, which Nessel announced Tuesday, will proceed normally, which means a preliminary examination leading to a decision on whether there is enough evidence to send the case to trial and a trial, if no plea deal is reached.

"The difference is Attorney General Nessel has telegraphed that this is the beginning of the charges, so we could see some twists and turns as new defendants are potentially charged," Schneider said. "If additional charges are brought, we could see some of those defendants cooperate against Chatfield."

Nessel announced 13 felony counts against Lee Chatfield and two against his wife, including embezzlement. She alleges the Levering Republican used a social welfare fund, Peninsula Fund, to pay for family vacations and to pay a personal credit card. Purchases included luxury shopping, fine dining and "swanky hotels," Nessel said (See "Lee Chatfield, Wife Charged with Embezzlement; No Charges in Sex Assault Investigation," 4/16/24).

"I think it's fair to anticipate a concerted effort to delay these proceedings or to run out the clock until I'm no longer in office as we've seen with some other cases," Nessel said, adding that is a

“significant amount” of material for the Chatfields’ attorneys to review before a preliminary examination can begin.

Investigations into financial crimes oftentimes take years to bring to court and can take just as long in court.

For example, the AG’s investigation into allegations against Smith took more than three years from the date charges were announced to sentencing, and just as long for the investigation into Hawkins.

Nessel along with Secretary of State Jocelyn BENSON also called for campaign finance reforms (See “Benson, Nessel Call For Campaign Finance Reform After Chatfield Charges,” 4/16/24).

Lee Chatfield is not the first public official to be charged in the past year.

Federal prosecutors charged former House Speaker Rick JOHNSON, who pleaded guilty in April 2023 and was subsequently sentenced to 55 months in prison for accepting a bribe during his term as state marijuana regulatory chair (See “Federal Judge Sentences Rick Johnson To 55 Months For Bribery,” 9/28/23).

Johnson’s case also saw two marijuana lobbyists, Brian PIERCE and Vincent BROWN, charged with funneling money to Johnson and businessman John DALALY charged and convicted for providing bribes to Johnson.

The AG’s office also charged Lee Chatfield’s top aides, Rob MINARD and Anné MINARD with conducting a criminal enterprise and conspiracy to commit that crime, among other offenses (See “AG Charges Ex-Chatfield Staffers With Felonies,” 12/21/23).

Republican campaign operators Heather LOMBARDINI, of Bright Sparks Strategies, and Sandy BAXTER, are charged for allegedly using two 501(c)4s connected to former Senate Majority Leader Mike SHIRKEY to fund Unlock Michigan (See “Charges Filed In Unlock Michigan ‘Dark Money’ Scheme,” 2/21/24).