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Taxpayers face hefty bill in Hells Angels case

COST WILL BE IN MILLIONS: With 28 defendants, no one knows what final tally will be.

By **Andrea Cavanaugh**, Staff writer
September 24, 2001

The District Attorney's Office's conspiracy case against members and associates of the Hells Angels might end up costing Ventura County taxpayers more than \$6 million.

A Ventura County Grand Jury in February indicted Hells Angels leader George Christie Jr. and 27 others after a three-year investigation. Fifteen of the defendants, including Christie, face the most serious charges of conspiring to sell drugs to school-age children.

Chief Deputy District Attorney Jeffrey Bennett, the lead prosecutor on the case, dismissed the \$6 million estimate but declined to give his own or to comment on the case.

"There's no way for me to know how much this is going to cost," Bennett said. "I don't think it's appropriate for me to speculate or guesstimate the cost of this."

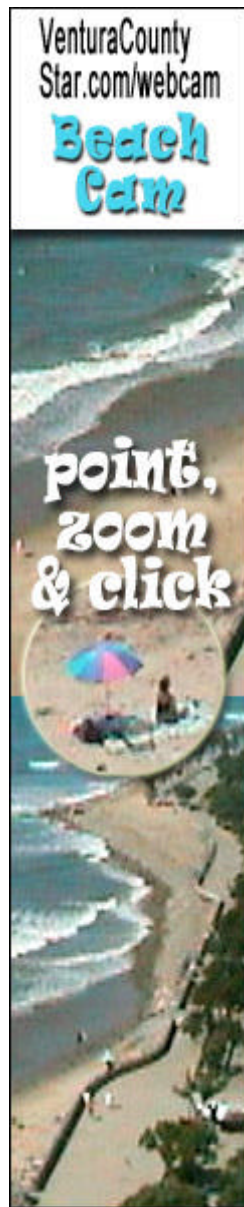
District Attorney Michael D. Bradbury also declined to comment on the case.

But his office already has spent \$1 million on attorneys and investigators and \$300,000 for additional expenses such as expert witnesses, travel and forensics, said Pete Pedroff, manager of its fiscal services unit.

Add an estimated \$4.5 million the county might have to pay to defend the 12 people assigned court-appointed lawyers and other miscellaneous costs, and the bill could top \$6 million.

Attorney Earnest Bell, who represents defendant Joshua Adams, an airman accused of stealing drugs from the military, estimated he will bill the county for 3,000 hours spent preparing and taking the case to trial.

Court-appointed attorneys are paid a standard rate of \$125 per hour. At that rate, one attorney working 3,000 hours would cost the county \$375,000.



Lawyers for all the conspiracy defendants can expect similar workloads, said another attorney in the case, Richard Loftus. In the conspiracy case, each attorney must review all 120,000 or so pages of evidence and hundreds of audio and videotapes compiled against the defendants, Loftus said.

"Actually, I would think that's a conservative estimate," Loftus said of the 3,000 hours.

If the figure is accurate, the county's bill for the 12 court-appointed attorneys could reach \$4.5 million.

In addition, the county must pay to provide copies of documents, video and audiotapes to all the court-appointed attorneys, at a cost of about \$120,000.

The county already paid \$250,000 to provide defense attorneys with copies of the Grand Jury transcripts.

And the figures do not include the costs of separate investigations conducted by law enforcement agencies.

"There's just really no way of knowing how many hours have been put into this," said Senior Deputy Renee Ferguson, a spokeswoman for the Ventura County Sheriff's Department.

"This investigation has been going on for two or three years."

Another consideration is the courtroom costs of holding a multiple-defendant trial expected to last six to nine months. If prosecutors decide on a single trial, Loftus wonders where a court proceeding involving 15 defendants and their attorneys would be held.

"I don't know if we've got a courtroom in Ventura County that's big enough," Loftus said. "We may end up trying this thing in the Staples Center."

Don Facciano, president and CEO of the Ventura County Taxpayers Association, said he supports the prosecution no matter what the cost.

"It's a done deal -- they have to prosecute," he said. "The unfortunate thing is that it cost over (the District Attorney's Office) budget, but it had to be done."

Defense attorney Bell, however, said justice could have been served by trying the defendants on drug charges without the conspiracy allegation.

"Is there a more efficient, economical way to resolve this case?" he said. "I just think this could have been handled much more efficiently for a tenth of the cost."

Loftus, who represents defendant George Christie III, agreed. "It probably could have been prosecuted differently, and a lot cheaper to the taxpayers," he said.

"I think there is probably a mountain of overkill in this case."

Jody Armour, a professor at the University of Southern California law school, said there are two advantages to charging defendants with conspiracy in addition to drug charges.

"There's a political benefit. If you can characterize something as a conspiracy, you can



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claim to be ridding society of an organized scourge," he said. "It's a little more glamorous than prosecuting your typical street-corner drug peddlers.

"The legal benefit is that you may not have to prove that the defendant was actually caught selling the drugs."

County officials considered the cost of bringing the case to trial when approving this year's budget. For example, the budget for indigent legal services was increased from \$1.8 million to \$2.4 million for the 2001-02 fiscal year, partly in anticipation of the Hells Angels case, county budget manager Bert Bigler said.

Bigler said he also has no idea how much the case will end up costing taxpayers. "If you could get a cost estimate out of the district attorney, I'd be very interested myself," he said.

Bell said he has tried to resolve his client's case without taking it to trial. He said he approached the District Attorney's Office to reach a plea agreement, but was rejected.

His client, Adams, was a member of an Air Force medical squadron and has already been convicted in a military court and is serving his sentence.

"The military gave him four years and 11 months," Bell said. "What benefit is there in trying him again?"

"I don't understand why we have to do this all over again," he said. "Keep in mind that I'm arguing against my own gravy train."

Attorney Jim Farley, who represents defendant William "Gunner" Wolf, agreed the county's tab for the conspiracy prosecution will be expensive.

"The cost is going to be monumental," Farley said. "It's going to be millions and millions and millions of dollars."

Farley questioned whether any threat the defendants might pose to the community is worth such a large sum to eradicate.

"It raises the question, 'What price do you pay for justice?' " budget manager Bigler said. "Everyone wants to say it's unlimited, but there aren't unlimited resources. It's a dilemma."

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Judge sentences Hells Angels case defendant to two years

By staff reports
December 1, 2001

A defendant in the alleged Hells Angels conspiracy to sell drugs to children was sentenced Friday to two years in prison.

Robert Hill, 29, was ordered by Superior Court Judge Bruce Clark to begin serving his sentence once he has completed another prison term. He is currently incarcerated on an unrelated drug charge.

Hill was among 28 people indicted by the Ventura County Grand Jury in February in a drug and racketeering case. Fifteen, including Hill and Hells Angels leader George Christie Jr., were accused of the most serious charges of conspiring to sell drugs to children.

Hill earlier pleaded guilty to drug and weapons charges in exchange for having conspiracy charges dropped. More than 50 counts of the indictment were dismissed at the time of sentencing.

Six defendants, including Hill, have been sentenced in the case.

Christian Menard, Hill's attorney, said he was pleased with the sentence, in light of the charges. "He was looking at more than 25 years under the terms of the indictment."

