

Parish pleads not guilty

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Photo by Wade Spees

Al Parish, the former Charleston Southern University professor and once-colorful fixture in the local business community was indicted earlier this month on 10 counts of criminal fraud related to the collapse of his unregistered, private investment pools.

Fallen economist Al Parish pleaded not guilty Wednesday to 10 criminal fraud charges and a charge of lying to government investigators, while his attorney laid the groundwork to get him out of jail on bond next week.

Parish's amnesia is improving, he's not a flight risk and the amount of money allegedly lost in his investment "pools" is nowhere near the tens of millions of dollars investigators projected earlier, his attorney said. Besides, said defense lawyer Andy Savage, most figures in the corporate scandals of the past decade were released before trial.

Savage's comments came as Parish appeared before Magistrate George Kosko for an arraignment inside the U.S. District Courthouse in Charleston.

The former Charleston Southern University professor and once-colorful fixture in the local business community was indicted earlier this month on 10 counts of criminal fraud related to the collapse of his unregistered, private investment pools.

Prosecutors contend that Parish, 49, stole, spent or squandered at least \$50 million entrusted to him by nearly 600 investors. He faces a maximum 205 years in prison and a \$2.5 million fine if convicted. Savage said Wednesday that investors probably turned over less than \$50 million

to Parish.

Other than to acknowledge his Miranda rights, Parish said little in court. Dressed in sandals and gray prison scrubs, he scanned court documents and legal books and briefly chatted with an inmate seated next to him who also was waiting to be arraigned.

About 15 friends, family and business associates were in the courtroom on his behalf, among them his wife and business partner, Yolanda Yoder, who has not been charged criminally.

Parish also appears to have lost some weight. He weighed 320 pounds when he went to court on April 12, the day he was arrested by the FBI.

Savage did not release details of a psychological report on Parish's amnesia, but told Kosko that Parish's memory is improving.

"There's no issue of competency at all," Savage said.

Parish's brother, Johnny, said his brother's memory is coming back "naturally." He and other family members have been visiting Parish in pairs for one hour, once a week.

Kosko ordered Savage and Assistant U.S. Attorney Charlie Bourne to prepare court papers on Parish's bond request. He set a May 31 hearing date to discuss whether Parish should be released in light of the charges and his health status.

Whether prosecutors will concede to a release request remains a question. Parish faces 11 criminal charges, 10 more than the lone count that triggered his initial arrest with no bond.

In account statements sent to investors, Parish "grossly misrepresented" account balances, according to the Securities and Exchange Commission.

Outside the courtroom, Savage said several of the areas of concern that prevented Parish's release on a bond have been cleared up. Namely, investigators have said Parish has hidden no money in offshore accounts.

Savage also suggested that Parish's major flaw may have simply been less-than-savvy investing, and that many of his hard assets, including paintings and other artwork, were purchased for much more than they were worth.

"The picture is becoming very clear that he was buying things at inflated prices," Savage said. "...I think you'll find that a lot of the missing money was actually spent legitimately."