

‘Like the Tiger King Got Elected Tax Collector’: Inside the Case That Ensnared Matt Gaetz

Joel Greenberg, a onetime local official in Florida, is accused of an array of crimes, including bribery, stalking and corruption.

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LAKE MARY, Fla. — Long before the F.B.I. began to scrutinize a tax collector in Florida named [Joel Greenberg](#) — and long before his trail led them to [Representative Matt Gaetz](#) — he amassed an outlandish record in the mundane local public office he had turned into a personal fief of power.

Records and interviews detailed a litany of accusations: Mr. Greenberg strutted into work with a pistol on his hip in a state that does not allow guns to be openly carried. He spent hundreds of thousands of taxpayer dollars to create no-show jobs for a relative and some of his groomsmen. He tried to talk his way out of a traffic ticket, asking a police officer for “professional courtesy.” He played police officer himself, putting a flashing light on his car to pull over a woman and accuse her of speeding. He published an anti-Muslim Facebook post. He solicited help to hack critics on the county commission.

Stalking a rival candidate got him arrested. Federal agents looking into the matter found at least five fake IDs in his wallet and backpack, and kept digging.

Their inquiry culminated in 33 federal charges against Mr. Greenberg, 36, including sex trafficking of a minor, bribery, fraud and stalking — and led to a mushrooming political scandal that burst into national news in recent days and ensnared Mr. Gaetz, who is a close ally of President Donald J. Trump, and other influential Florida Republicans, with the investigation continuing.

Though the sex trafficking charge against Mr. Greenberg and the ensuing [Justice Department examination into Mr. Gaetz](#) — including whether he had sex with the same 17-year-old girl — have received the most attention, the array of schemes that Mr. Greenberg is suspected of are broader and altogether show an astonishing disregard for the law by an elected official.

Interviews with people in Seminole County who dealt with Mr. Greenberg and a review of news articles and public records from his past suggest that he was a wealthy but troubled teenager who drifted through young adulthood before turning to local politics five years ago and embracing Trumpism.

He quickly built relationships with Mr. Gaetz, 38, whom he had met in political circles that also included Chris Dorworth, 44, a real estate developer and lobbyist for Ballard Partners, a powerful firm that had [close ties to the Trump administration](#). (Mr. Greenberg hired Ballard in 2017 to lobby for the tax collector's office.) Mr. Dorworth [announced](#) on Friday that he had resigned from the firm.

Mr. Greenberg relished hobnobbing with the well-connected: He spoke at a Trump campaign rally in 2016 and was invited to the White House three years later.

But he also appeared to ingratiate himself with Mr. Gaetz and others more privately as well: by soliciting women for sex on their behalf, sometimes in Ecstasy-fueled encounters, people familiar with the arrangements have said. Mr. Gaetz has broadly denied allegations against him, including paying for sex or having sex with a minor.

In the end, Mr. Greenberg went from being an outsider elected on an anticorruption platform to, prosecutors say, becoming corrupted himself. The world he built quickly fell apart when he was first indicted in June. He resigned and dropped his bid for re-election. Within days, one of the women crashed a vehicle into a tree near Mr. Greenberg's house, suffering minor injuries, according to a police report of the crash, which has not been previously reported.

And indications in court last week that he [plans to plead guilty](#), suggesting he will cooperate with prosecutors, further prompted former friends to abandon him. "No one wants to talk to me anymore," Mr. Greenberg [told The Orlando Sentinel](#) in the fall.

Mr. Greenberg's lawyer, Fritz Scheller, declined to make his client, who has been in jail since March for violating terms of his bail, available for a jailhouse interview.

Mr. Greenberg acted unlike any other tax collector in Florida. His small-time position left him dissatisfied. His friendships gave him a taste of greater power. He tested the boundaries of what he could get away with, until it all imploded.

Daniel A. Pérez, a lawyer who represented one of Mr. Greenberg's former employees in a labor dispute, likened the disreputable saga to a Netflix series: "It's like the Tiger King got elected tax collector."

Adrift in Early Life

He was not expected to win.

The previous tax collector, Ray Valdes, a Republican, had been in office for 28 years. But Mr. Valdes had been accused of ethical misconduct, and Mr. Greenberg, a newcomer, saw an opening. He raised five times as much money for a primary challenge, almost all

self-funded — his father founded an empire of dental offices — and ousted the incumbent.

Mr. Greenberg had little record to run on. He campaigned as a small-business owner, with an advertising company named DG3 Network registered to his name. He had hosted a daily afternoon sports-talk AM radio show. He was 31 and had recently married Abby Weldgen, a real-estate agent.

Mr. Greenberg attended evening classes at Rollins College between 2005 and 2012 but never graduated, according to the school. His name appeared on a burglary incident report when he was 18 and on an involuntary psychiatric commitment report when he was 21, but both reports were sealed, according to records unearthed in 2016 by [WFTV](#), a local news station. Mr. Greenberg declined to speak to the station about them.

When Mr. Greenberg was 15, he and his mother, Susan Greenberg, [told a sports columnist for The Sentinel](#) that he had benefited from the mentorship of an Orlando Magic basketball player, John Amaechi, who sometimes shot hoops with “wayward” teenage boys.

Ms. Greenberg told The Sentinel that her son had been diagnosed with attention deficit disorder as a toddler, took medication as a child and developed Tourette’s syndrome. “Joel is my shining star that needs more polishing, more buffing,” she said. “He’s the one who keeps me on my knees. It was a belligerent, defiant, rebellion-type of thing at home.”

Mr. Greenberg’s parents sent him to the Florida Air Academy in Melbourne for military-style discipline, but “I guess it just didn’t sink in,” young Joel told The Sentinel.

Asked what he would like to be one day, he answered, “I want to be a good person.”

Exploiting Elected Office

Being elected tax collector could have offered Mr. Greenberg a stable, if low-profile, career in government. But he had run as a reformer and appeared to bask in the trappings of his new role. Two months after winning the Republican primary in August 2016 — effectively clinching the office, since no Democrat was on the ballot — he made the speaking lineup at a Trump rally in Sanford, Fla., bounding onto the airport tarmac stage in sunglasses before Mr. Trump arrived.

“The media has tried to destroy a good man’s reputation,” he said of Mr. Trump, “and in destroying that, they would destroy that which he represents: the ideas that you and I hold dear in our hearts, that we know is right and true.”

By June 2017, Mr. Gaetz [floated the idea](#) to a Tampa radio station that Mr. Greenberg could run for Congress. He called him a “disrupter” who had taken the tax collector’s office “by storm.”

A few months into office, Mr. Greenberg was, according to an employee and others in his orbit, already bored.

Four complaints about his actions as tax collector were made to the Florida Department of Law Enforcement from August 2017 to August 2018, including accusations that he had asked a contractor to hack the county’s computers, department records show.

He pulled over a woman in 2017 while wearing shorts, a backward baseball cap and his tax collector’s badge around his neck. She said he had yelled at her for supposedly cutting him off and driving “like a bat out of hell,” according to a complaint she filed to the sheriff’s office.

News reports alleged financial mismanagement. A county audit concluded that Mr. Greenberg had “wasted” more than \$1 million in taxpayer money and used his tax collector credit card to purchase body armor, weapons and a drone. By the end of his tenure, his office — in top-shelf space he leased — was strewn with electronics, one person who saw it said. A poorly installed server to allow for cryptocurrency payments to the tax collector’s office was blamed for a fire this year.

“Seminole County elected a criminal into office, unknowingly,” said J.R. Kroll, a Republican who was elected tax collector last year, after Mr. Greenberg’s resignation.

State and local authorities never charged Mr. Greenberg with anything more than traffic violations.

The Downfall

What ultimately got Mr. Greenberg into trouble — as so often happens in Florida — began with a clash over real estate.

His friend Mr. Dorworth wanted to build a shopping and residential complex on rural lands in eastern Seminole County. But an opposition group defeated the project in 2018, and eventually its leader, a music teacher named Brian A. Beute, decided he wanted to go beyond activism and run for office, filing a 2020 candidacy against Mr. Greenberg.

Soon after, an anonymous letter was sent to the school where Mr. Beute worked, falsely accusing him of having a sexual relationship with a student. Social media accounts popped up making other repugnant claims about him.

The Seminole County Sheriff’s Office found Mr. Greenberg’s fingerprints on the letter. Deputies called in federal agents, said David Bear, Mr. Beute’s lawyer.

That set off a cascade of criminal charges against Mr. Greenberg filed in four indictments, including that he used driver's licenses surrendered to his office to create fake IDs for women with whom he "[engaged in 'sugar daddy' relationships](#)." Prosecutors say he obtained hundreds of thousands of dollars in fraudulent loans from a Covid-19 relief program and embezzled more than \$400,000 from the county.

Seminole is a suburban county of about half a million people northeast of Orlando. The Greenberg affair, outlandish as it was, might have never made waves outside of Central Florida if not for the ties investigators found to other Republicans — "the Seminole County Republican mafia," Mr. Bear called it — and Mr. Gaetz.

Mr. Greenberg and Mr. Gaetz met through the tight-knit group of prominent Trump backers in Florida in 2017, according to a person familiar with the matter. Mr. Greenberg had no political experience before he was elected. Mr. Gaetz represents a district some 400 miles away.

Yet Mr. Greenberg and Mr. Gaetz saw each other regularly in recent years. They gathered at Mr. Dorworth's home in January 2019 to celebrate that [Gov. Ron DeSantis](#), a Republican close to Mr. Gaetz, had overturned a ban on smokable medical marijuana. The three men visited Washington together that June, and Mr. Greenberg posted photographs on social media from the White House lawn, including one of his daughter with Mr. Gaetz and Mr. Trump.

A few years ago — the exact date is unclear — Mr. Greenberg brought Mr. Gaetz into the tax collector's branch office in Lake Mary over a weekend. The following Monday, an employee found the alarm deactivated and driver's licenses strewn over a desk. She reviewed surveillance video and saw Mr. Greenberg with another man by that desk. When she asked Mr. Greenberg about it, according to text messages reviewed by The Times, he wrote back, "Yes I was showing congressman Gaetz what our operation looked like. Did I leave something on?"

What the men were doing is unclear.

In a separate episode on a Sunday in September 2018, Mr. Greenberg texted an employee about getting Mr. Gaetz an "emergency replacement" I.D. by Tuesday, claiming that the congressman had lost his. Mr. Gaetz [told Politico](#) that he had briefly lost his wallet but found it before needing the I.D. replacement.

Days after Mr. Greenberg was first indicted last year, a woman crashed her car into a tree a few hundred yards from his home early one morning, according to a crash report. The woman, according to two people familiar with their relationship, had previously had sex with Mr. Greenberg and received money from him on mobile payment apps; she had been leaving his house, the people said.

When a neighbor called 911, the woman was crying out incoherently in the background, according to a recording of the call. The neighbor said the woman was calling a friend. Moments later, an unidentified man could be heard on the caller's end of the line.

"She got a bump on her head," the man said. "There's a little cut on her head. She's just very shaken."

The latest indictment of Mr. Greenberg was unsealed late last month. The accusations, which included defrauding the Small Business Administration out of more than \$432,000 in Covid-19 relief loans, described wrongdoing that began days after Mr. Greenberg was first arrested and released on bond last summer, prosecutors said.

His wife left the house for at least some time after the arrest. Sheriff's deputies were called to the house in November after a verbal dispute between the couple, records show.

In February, Mr. Greenberg drove to Jupiter, Fla., looking for his wife, a 180-mile drive that violated the curfew and travel restrictions that were conditions of his release. His mother-in-law called the police. At some point after Mr. Greenberg returned home, he burned her clothes, according to a person familiar with the episode.

When sheriff's deputies went to rearrest him at his home in Lake Mary, Mr. Greenberg claimed to have explosives and threatened to harm himself, according to a deputy's report. He surrendered after hours of negotiation.

He now sits in jail, awaiting an expected plea deal and most likely a yearslong prison sentence.