

How the Justice Department came to investigate Rep. Matt Gaetz

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The missive arrived at an Orlando-area preparatory school in October 2019, outlining a damaging allegation against a music teacher there.

The teacher, in the letter's telling, had had an inappropriate sexual relationship with the purported student who had written it. And the writer claimed to offer proof: private Facebook messages in which the teacher, Brian Beute, told his alleged victim: "Please remember to keep this a secret. I could go to jail."

Beute, who had recently announced his candidacy in the local tax collector's race, knew the allegation was a lie, as investigators quickly determined. But what he could not foresee is how the ploy to sabotage his run for local office would drag the seedy politics in Seminole County, Fla., into the national spotlight and put a U.S. congressman with close ties to former president Donald Trump in the crosshairs of a Justice Department investigation.

The allegations against Beute, federal investigators concluded, had been fabricated by his incumbent opponent, Joel Greenberg, in a bid to smear him. But when authorities arrested Greenberg and sifted through his electronic records and devices — according to documents and people involved in the case — they discovered a medley of other alleged wrongdoing, leading them to open an investigation of possible sex trafficking involving a far more high-profile Florida Republican: Rep. Matt Gaetz.

This account of how the Justice Department's investigation evolved from an examination of a local tax collector's alleged misdeeds to a sprawling probe of sex and corruption involving a prominent Trump ally is based on interviews with more than a dozen people involved in the investigation or otherwise tied to Gaetz or Greenberg, as well as police reports and other public records. Many of those interviewed spoke on the condition of anonymity because the matter remains politically sensitive.

Harlan Hill, a Gaetz spokesman, said in response to a request for comment, "Is the media just going to continue running the same — anonymously 'sourced' — stories every day, repackaged, in order to avoid admitting the obvious . . . that over the past two weeks they hyped charges and allegations that Rep. Gaetz has repeatedly denied and that there remains zero evidence of?"

A Justice Department spokesman declined to comment.

Though the investigation has stretched for months, Gaetz has not been charged with any crimes, and he has denied wrongdoing. Greenberg, initially charged in a two-count indictment related to his alleged effort to smear Beute, now faces 33 federal charges, including sex trafficking of a child, aggravated identity theft, wire fraud and bribery. He has pleaded not guilty, but at a court hearing in Orlando last week, his attorney and a prosecutor on the case said [they are in plea negotiations](#).

Greenberg, according to a person familiar with the matter, has [been providing investigators information](#) about Gaetz since last year in a bid for leniency — a potentially ominous sign for the congressman, though any account Greenberg offers will face significant questions because of the crimes of which he is accused. They include fraud and fabricating evidence against a political rival

Beute — whose ordeal triggered some of the events that followed — said he believes fallout from the case could force a reckoning for the lax oversight and clubby nature of Florida’s political system.

“I don’t believe this entire story is nearly over,” said Beute, who ultimately lost his bid to become tax collector. “My prayer and my hope right now is there will be no stone unturned, and this can be an example of the history of our country and not the future of our country.”

'Greenberg Mafia'

Long before Beute entered the race for tax collector, controversy had swirled around the incumbent in the position.

The scion of a wealthy Florida family, Greenberg, now 36, had swept into the Seminole County tax collector’s office in 2016 with a partially self-funded campaign, defeating longtime incumbent and fellow Republican Ray Valdes on the promise of reform. Gaetz was elected to Congress the same year.

But Greenberg’s eccentricities became apparent almost immediately. He began allowing his staff to open-carry firearms around the office and started wearing a badge, even though he did not work in law enforcement. He was investigated, though never charged, for impersonating a police officer when he pulled over a woman using a badge and lights on his personal vehicle and accused her of speeding near his house, according to a police report of the encounter.

Greenberg also became close with Gaetz, now 38, who hailed from a panhandle district hundreds of miles away, and a group of other Republican men in the Orlando area. They included Gaetz’s former roommate when he was a state lawmaker, the lobbyist Chris Dorworth, 44, whom Greenberg hired to expand his office’s influence at the state capitol, according to emails and a contract from the tax collector’s office.

Greenberg and Gaetz appeared to become fast friends. As far back as June 2017, just months after Greenberg had taken office, Gaetz proclaimed publicly that the tax collector was a “disrupter” who should run for Congress himself. A month later, Greenberg posted a photo of himself, Gaetz and former Trump adviser Roger Stone smiling after dinner together. Emails from 2018 show that Greenberg agreed to put his name on an op-ed, which aides to Gaetz had been circulating among themselves, defending the congressman for inviting a Holocaust denier to Trump’s State of the Union address that year.

One person who spoke to federal investigators provided copies of text messages showing Greenberg confirm to an office employee that he had visited a tax collector facility one weekend in 2018 with Gaetz, writing, “I was showing congressman Gaetz what our operation looked like,” according to a copy of the message obtained by The Washington Post.

Another message shows Greenberg asking an employee for help procuring Gaetz an “emergency replacement” identification or driver’s license.

Greenberg would later be charged with making false identification documents to facilitate sex trafficking. Gaetz [told Politico](#) that he had “never been involved in whatever Greenberg was doing with IDs,” though he confirmed that he had asked at one point about a replacement ID.

“Once I temporarily lost my wallet and asked if I could go to his office and get a lawful replacement,” Gaetz said. “This is what tax collectors do. I later found my wallet and didn’t need this service.”

As Gaetz and Greenberg’s friendship blossomed, anonymous complaints started coming in to the Florida Department of Law Enforcement that Greenberg was giving jobs to unqualified friends, doling out unnecessary contracts and even asking a contract employee to hack into the Seminole County government network, according to Florida Department of Law Enforcement reports.

Three such complaints arrived in August 2017, according to a Florida Department of Law Enforcement report, though officials determined, in consultation with a local prosecutor, that the allegations “did not warrant a criminal investigation.” While the complaints alleged “possible kickbacks and collusion,” they did not provide “any firsthand information related to criminal activity,” according to the report.

Similarly, when another anonymous complaint in 2018 referenced the “GREENBERG MAFIA at Seminole County Tax Collector’s Office,” the Department of Law Enforcement determined that there was “still not a criminal predicate” to investigate and that the

matter was one that should be handled by the Florida Department of Revenue, which approves the tax collector's budget.

Greenberg previously defended his spending in comments to the Orlando Sentinel, telling the newspaper he was a novice at the job and inherited the office with little transition. "When we came in, I had to surround myself with people I worked with in the private sector and had great success with," he told the newspaper.

Sex trafficking

An audit released in 2020 — after Greenberg had resigned from his post following his arrest — found that the tax collector had "wasted" more than \$1 million in taxpayer money on contracts while racking up nearly \$367,000 in "questioned or unaccounted for" charges on office credit cards, including for hotel expenses, body armor, weapons, ammunition and other tactical gear.

Greenberg approved a \$75,000-a-year lobbying deal with Dorworth's firm, Ballard Partners. The auditor later found there was "no reason, during normal operations," for the tax collector to hire an outside lobbyist. A Ballard spokesman declined to comment.

Greenberg signed a \$5,000-a-month contract with a consulting firm founded by former Florida secretary of state Michael Ertel (R) and hired Michelle Ertel, Ertel's wife, for a six-figure-salary public affairs position that auditors found "falls completely outside the scope of a Tax Collector office."

In an interview, Michael Ertel, who previously served as the elections supervisor in Seminole County, said he was not social friends with Greenberg but had gotten to know him because both were involved in Republican politics. He defended his work for the tax collector's office, pointing to a 206-page report he prepared detailing how he assessed various office operations — such as contracts and pandemic operations — and recommended improvements.

"It's frustrating because the audit that the county produced said there was no work product, and it was clearly there," Ertel said.

Of the auditor's questioning of his wife's activity, Ertel said, "I would say most government offices have some sort of a public affairs director, be it in title or activity, and that's what she did during that time."

Greenberg also hired state Rep. Anthony Sabatini, a Republican booster of Gaetz, signing a \$3,000-a-month contract in 2019. Emails from the office suggested he advised Greenberg on a question of when the tax collector could issue new driver's licenses and did other legal work.

“I represented him in a wrongful-termination case against three employees that he fired when he won office,” Sabatini said, when asked recently about his work for Greenberg. “I think I met him that year before.”

By spring of 2019, Greenberg had brought on a lawyer to represent him in some type of federal probe, a lawyer said in an early court hearing in Greenberg’s case — though it is unclear what authorities were focused on. It was his private sex life that would eventually generate some of his most serious criminal exposure and grow to encompass Gaetz.

The two men were in many ways cut from the same cloth, according to people who know both: brash politicians who hailed from families of considerable wealth and who themselves rose to power quickly. They also enjoyed parties and the company of women, people familiar with the men say.

Federal prosecutors allege that between May and November 2017, Greenberg trafficked a minor victim between the age of 14 and 18, according to Greenberg’s indictment. They also accuse him of making fake IDs for himself and for individuals so that he could “facilitate his efforts to engage in commercial sex acts,” according to the indictment. In addition to his public touting of Greenberg’s credentials, people who spoke to Gaetz said that the congressman repeatedly boasted about the women he was able to meet through Greenberg. He would show off images of naked or topless women he claimed to have met through his friend, these people said.

Federal investigators are now exploring whether either man paid for sex in violation of federal sex trafficking laws, and whether Gaetz might have been involved with the same minor at issue in Greenberg’s case: a 17-year-old girl, people familiar with the matter have said. Investigators also are exploring allegations that Gaetz and others used illegal drugs during some of their encounters with women, a person familiar with the matter said. Gaetz has denied ever paying for sex or having been sexually involved with a 17-year-old as an adult.

One source of investigators’ interest, people familiar with the matter said, is a trip Gaetz allegedly took to the Bahamas in recent years with women and Jason Pirozzolo, a politically connected Orlando-area hand surgeon and private pilot who knew Gaetz and socialized with Greenberg, according to multiple people involved in Florida politics. Pirozzolo served as a fundraiser during the gubernatorial campaign for Ron DeSantis (R), and after DeSantis was elected, Gaetz pushed unsuccessfully for Pirozzolo to be appointed as the state’s surgeon general. A lawyer for Pirozzolo did not return messages seeking comment, and attempts to speak with him at his home and office have been unsuccessful.

'There has been a crime committed here'

When Beute announced he was challenging Greenberg in the Republican primary, he told [the Orlando Sentinel](#) he was concerned by the tax collector's "troubling behaviors." A music teacher at Trinity Preparatory School, Beute was a political novice, though he was president of a group called Save Rural Seminole. The group formed to fight a proposed, controversial mega-development backed by Dorworth, who had been the lobbyist for the tax collector's office.

Soon after announcing his run, a letter arrived to the head of the school, accusing Beute of sexual misconduct with a student. Put on leave because of the nature of the allegation, Beute turned to a friend who had worked with him on the Save Rural Seminole group, lawyer David Bear.

In an interview, Bear said that he told Beute he was not a criminal defense attorney but that Beute insisted he did not need one. Bear said the Seminole County Sheriff's Office in early November told him Beute was no longer a suspect, and he urged officials to probe who made the false reports.

"I say, 'Thanks for doing all this, but there has been a crime committed here,'" Bear said.

A police report shows that Bear notified investigators of three potential suspects with motive, including Greenberg as well as Dorworth, who had sparred with Beute's group over the development project.

A lawyer for Greenberg declined to comment. Dorworth did not return repeated messages. He [wrote on Twitter last week](#) that he was leaving his lobby firm and that he had told its head, Brian Ballard, "I don't think it's fair for the recent media storm to take away from their missions."

Bear said he sent preservation letters to Facebook and Twitter so they would hold on to evidence of the impostor accounts set up to smear Beute, and successfully persuaded the sheriff's office to issue subpoenas.

But he became worried that the sheriff's office lacked the resources to fully pursue the case and encouraged them to ask federal authorities for help. He said he was soon contacted by the U.S. attorney's office requesting information, and helped facilitate investigators examining not just what happened to Beute but other allegations of possible malfeasance at Greenberg's office.

When Greenberg was first charged by federal authorities in June 2020, the indictment was only for stalking and unlawfully using the identity of another person — both counts stemming from his bid to smear Beute. But as investigators sifted through electronic devices, according to people familiar with the matter, they found evidence of more alleged wrongdoing, including payments to women over electronic platforms. Prosecutors brought a superseding indictment in July, alleging Greenberg had used licenses surrendered to the tax collector's office to produce fake identification

documents. Then in August, they added the sex-trafficking count against Greenberg, and last month added new allegations of embezzling more than \$400,000 from the tax collector's office and seeking to defraud a [coronavirus](#) relief loan program.

Bear asserted that were it not for his and Beute's persistence in holding those accountable who made false allegations against him, the case might have gone away altogether. State authorities had known of allegations of misconduct surrounding Greenberg for years and had shown little appetite to bring a criminal case. While it is possible federal authorities would have pursued the matter eventually, given the allegations surrounding Greenberg, the crime against Beute gave them an immediate reason to arrest the tax collector and eventually open the investigation into Gaetz. Bear said Beute considered dropping the matter after he was cleared of the lurid allegation but ultimately pressed forward.

"That was a consideration — should he just bow out, and all these threats will go away. He decided not to," Bear said. "All of these other things mushroomed out of that one decision for him to stand tall."