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N.J. to drop all charges against man in A.C. probe Stephen Casasanto was one of 24 indicted during an investigation of mob ties to gambling at the Borgata.

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By George Anastasia INQUIRER STAFF WRITER
POSTED: October 15, 2008

New Jersey authorities have decided to drop conspiracy, gambling and money-laundering charges against a South Philadelphia man indicted in the multimillion dollar, mob-linked bookmaking investigation at the Borgata casino in Atlantic City.

Peter Aselline, a spokesman for the State Attorney General's Office, said yesterday that his office intends to drop all charges against Stephen Casasanto, one of 24 defendants indicted in the high-profile case.

The decision came shortly after Casasanto's lawyer, Charles Peruto Jr., filed a million-dollar lawsuit against the Attorney General's Office, alleging that his client had been wrongly accused.

"Throughout this matter, the Attorney General's Office failed to properly investigate whether or not the person that they tape-recorded . . . was, in fact . . . Stephen Casasanto or some other 'Stephen,'" Peruto wrote in a civil complaint filed last month.

Aselline said that the decision to drop the charges "had nothing to do with the civil suit" but that he could not comment on pending litigation.

The New Jersey Attorney General's Office, Deputy Attorney General Kerry DiJoseph, the prosecutor in the case, and State Police Detective David Feldstein, one of the lead investigators, were named as defendants.

Peruto said despite the fact that the charges are being dropped, he intends to pursue the civil case, which accuses the defendants of negligence, intentional infliction of emotional distress, abuse of process and defamation.

Casasanto, 38, is the brother of a slain mob figure John "Johnny Gongs" Casasanto, who was found shot to death in his South Philadelphia rowhouse in November 2003.

No one has been charged in that murder.

John Casasanto was jailed on racketeering charges in the mid-1990s for his role as an enforcer for mob boss John Stanfa.

Before his arrest in the Borgata case, Stephen Casasanto had never been linked to any organized crime activities, a fact that Peruto pointed to repeatedly in arguing his client was unjustly targeted in the gambling probe.

Authorities alleged that an illegal sports-betting ring run out of the high-stakes poker room of the Borgata Hotel Casino & Spa had ties to the South Philadelphia mob.

Since his client's arrest nearly a year ago, Peruto has said that investigators misidentified Casasanto, confusing him with someone else named Stephen who was picked up on wiretaps during a 20-month investigation.

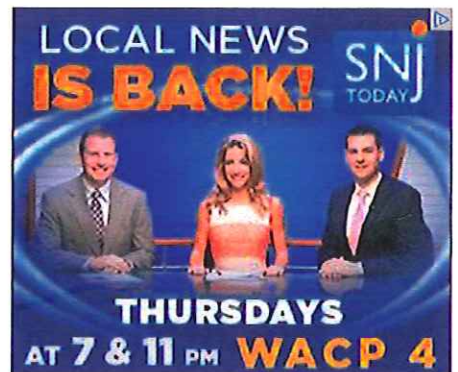
In a memo sent out last week, DiJoseph, the state prosecutor, said "additional investigation" had led her to believe that the state could no longer sustain its burden of proving the charges against Casasanto.

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Asetline would not comment yesterday on whether investigators had misidentified Casasanto on wiretaps.

The Attorney General's Office previously dropped charges against three others linked to the case, including reputed mob figure Michael Lancellotti.

Lancellotti was one of more than two dozen individuals arrested in November as authorities wrapped up the case.

Several months later, however, when the defendants were indicted, no charges were filed against Lancellotti.

As in the Casasanto case, investigators apparently had misidentified someone else named Michael picked up on wiretaps.

Authorities allege that the multimillion-dollar betting operation was headed by mob associate Jack Buscemi of Mullica Hill, who was described as one of the biggest bookmakers in the Philadelphia area.

A second key defendant in the case, authorities allege, is Anthony Nicodemo, a reputed mob soldier from South Philadelphia.

Nicodemo, according to documents filed in the current case, is a suspect in the murder of John Casasanto.

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