

Criminal trial against Trump Organization begins as jurors are screened

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NEW YORK — Jury selection in the Trump Organization's criminal tax fraud trial began Monday morning with the screening of about 130 juror prospects, some of whom could serve on the panel that will decide whether the former president's namesake company committed crimes.

New York Supreme Court Justice Juan Merchan told the potential jurors that the case would last as long as six weeks. He gave them an overview of the charges and began speaking to dozens of people individually in a back room, where those would-be panelists who alerted him to potential issues offered reasons they might not be able to serve.

Merchan refused to allow members of the press to be present for the individual screening portion of the proceeding, a decision several news organizations were challenging.

Additional questioning of potential jurors occurred in the courtroom later. Jury selection is expected to continue Tuesday.

Before the solo sessions, Merchan read aloud the names of possible witnesses and people whose may be mentioned during testimony — a list that included former president Donald Trump and other executives at the company. Ivanka Trump, Donald Trump Jr. and Eric Trump, three of his adult children, were also on the list, along with longtime chief financial officer Allen Weisselberg and members of his family. His family is said to have benefited from some of the perks he got from the Trump Organization, including cars and apartments, but none of the relatives were charged.

Weisselberg, who pleaded guilty in August to 15 counts tied to an alleged longtime fraud scheme within the organization, is expected to be a main witness against the company and has promised to discuss his role as the orchestrator of an operation involving untaxed compensation for Trump Organization executives. He avoided paying nearly \$1 million in taxes by omitting benefits he received from the company as unreported compensation.

His testimony is supposed to be limited to his direct involvement, and prosecutors hope to be able to prove the company absorbs liability through his conduct. In the past, he has refused to cooperate against Trump about other matters the Manhattan District Attorney's Office is still investigating.

In exchange for his testimony, Weisselberg is expected to get a five-month jail sentence. He was previously facing up to 15 years.

Prospective jurors Monday were expected to notify the judge if they had any personal conflicts based on the list of names or if they had “a legitimate good faith reason based solely on what you’ve heard up until this point about the case” for being unable to serve. That filtered out about half of the original 130.

Manhattan District Attorney Alvin Bragg has said he is still evaluating whether Trump committed crimes when allegedly manipulating the value of his assets to get favorable loan and interest rates, or devaluing his assets to reduce his tax liability. New York Attorney General Letitia James has sued Trump, his children and Weisselberg for fraud in connection to that alleged business practice.

The Trump Organization is on trial at a time when the former president faces investigations and court proceedings stemming from false election fraud claims, the Jan. 6 attack on the U.S. Capitol, as well as business and personal entanglements.

The Justice Department is evaluating whether Trump and his staff illegally hoarded classified documents at Mar-a-Lago, his private club and residence in Palm Beach, after leaving the White House, and the House committee investigating the events that led to Jan. 6 has subpoenaed him to testify.