

# ***NEWS RELEASE***

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SOUTHERN DISTRICT OF CALIFORNIA  
San Diego, California***

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***For Immediate Release***

## **Former Calexico City Officials Admit to Accepting Bribes**

**NEWS RELEASE SUMMARY – June 11, 2020**

SAN DIEGO – Former Calexico City Councilman David Romero and Bruno Suarez-Soto, a former commissioner on the city’s Economic Development and Financial Advisory Commission, pleaded guilty in federal court today to corruption charges, admitting that they accepted cash bribes in exchange for promises of official action by the city.

The defendants entered their pleas before U.S. Magistrate Judge Bernard G. Skomal, who set sentencing for September 4, 2020 before District Judge Cathy Ann Bencivengo. Romero and Suarez-Soto were allowed to remain free on \$10,000 personal appearance bonds secured by their own signatures.

According to their plea agreements, Romero and Soto accepted \$35,000 in cash bribes from an undercover FBI agent who they believed represented investors seeking to open a cannabis dispensary in Calexico. In return, Romero and Soto guaranteed the rapid issuance of a city permit for the dispensary, and to revoke or hinder other applicants if necessary to ensure that the bribe payer’s application was successful. Both men

admitted they had taken bribes from others in the past. Referring to this \$35,000 payment, they told the undercover agent, “This isn’t our first rodeo.”

In addition to being a councilman, Romero served as Calexico’s Mayor Pro Tem, meaning he was set to become Mayor in July 2020. Soto recently resigned from the City commission responsible for promoting business and community growth and coordinating with prospective developers to help them invest in the City of Calexico. Romero resigned his position with the City of Calexico as part of his plea agreement, effective Monday, June 8.

“David Romero was about to become the highest-ranking public official in the city of Calexico, but he and his partner-in-crime sold their power and influence to the highest bidder in a secret pay-to-play scheme,” said U.S. Attorney Robert Brewer. “They are the ones who will pay now.”

“The corruption, lies, and greed of Romero and Suarez-Soto were uncovered by FBI Agents working in our Imperial Valley Office,” said Omer Meisel, Acting FBI Special Agent in Charge of the San Diego Division and Imperial County Resident Agency. “The community in Imperial Valley has a right to leaders who put the public’s interest first and serve the community honorably. The FBI is committed to investigating those who violate their position of trust.”

According to their plea agreements, during a December 19, 2019 meeting at a restaurant in Calexico with the undercover FBI agent, Romero and Soto agreed to fast-track the agent’s purported application for a cannabis dispensary permit and guaranteed its rapid issuance in exchange for a \$35,000 bribe. The defendants also offered to delay permit applications by competitors.

Toward the conclusion of the December 19, 2019 meeting, when the undercover agent asked if Romero and Soto might later ask for more than the \$35,000 payment, Romero assured him that they would not, per court filings. “This is done. Set and sealed,” Romero said. Romero explained that he and Soto would require the money to be paid up front, however, because they had done similar work for other people, and those people had not paid the agreed-upon fee after the favors had been rendered. Romero and Soto agreed to accept payment of the \$35,000 from the agent in two installments, however: half up front, and half “when it’s a for sure thing.”

At this meeting the undercover agent asked whether the payment of \$35,000 would “get us in front of the line” of applicants. Soto answered, “Hell yeah,” according to court records. Romero added that he “didn’t want to say it in front of everybody, but it will.”

On January 9, 2020, Romero and Soto attended a second meeting with the undercover agent at a restaurant in El Centro, California. During the meeting, according to court filings, Romero reminded the undercover agent how difficult it was to work with the City of Calexico, and how fortunate it was that the agent was working with Romero. Soto later added that in return for the bribe, Romero would cut through “so much bullshit [red] tape that exists” with the City.

During a discussion of the approval process for the permit application referenced in court records, Romero explained that the people who have to approve the undercover agent’s license were “my best friends at the entire City Hall.” When asked if the “best friends” had already signed off on the plan, Romero responded “Fuck, yeah!” and laughed.

According to admissions in the plea agreements and documents filed in court, at the conclusion of the January 9, 2020 meeting, in the parking lot outside the restaurant, with Romero looking on, the undercover agent handed Soto \$17,500 in cash and explained that he divided the first installment of the bribe into two

envelopes: one with \$8,800 and another with \$8,700. The agent asked whether “we’re good,” and Romero responded, “Trust me” and added, “In my line of business, I can’t fuck up. Which means he [Soto] can’t fuck up.”

The defendants accepted the second installment, \$17,500 in cash, during a third meeting on January 30 in a parking lot outside a restaurant in El Centro, per the plea agreements. Both men also admitted to creating a shell corporation to launder the proceeds of their bribery scheme.

The charges filed in the case also allege that both men lied to the FBI when interviewed by agents at the conclusion of the January 30 meeting. Romero falsely denied being part of any agreement with the undercover agent, and denied that anyone had made any “guarantees” to the agent. Similarly, Soto falsely denied making any “guarantees” to the undercover agent and denied receiving any prior payments from the agent.

U.S. Attorney Brewer praised Assistant U.S. Attorney Nicholas Pilchak, DOJ Public Integrity Section trial attorney Joshua Rothstein and FBI agents for working hard to achieve justice in this matter.

The case against Romero and Suarez-Soto is a public corruption investigation being conducted by the FBI and the U.S. Attorney’s Office. Any member of the public who has information related to this or any other public corruption matter in Imperial County or San Diego is encouraged to provide information to the FBI’s email tip line at [tips.fbi.gov](https://tips.fbi.gov) or to contact their local FBI Field Office. In Imperial County, the FBI can be reached 24 hours a day at 858-320-1800 or 1-877-NO-BRIBE (662-7423).

**DEFENDANTS**

**Case Number 20cr1215**

Calexico City Councilman David Romero	Age: 36	Residence: Calexico, CA
Calexico City Commissioner Bruno Suarez-Soto	Age: 28	Residence: Calexico, CA

**SUMMARY OF CHARGES**

Conspiracy to Commit Federal Program Bribery, in violation of Title 18, United States Code, Sections 371 and 666 (a) (1) (B)  
Maximum Penalty: Five years in prison; \$250,000 fine.

**AGENCY**

Federal Bureau of Investigation