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## New Blow to New Orleans in Council Leader's Plea

By [ADAM NOSSITER](#)

NEW ORLEANS, Aug. 13 — In a new blow to this city's ethically troubled politics, the City Council's senior member, Oliver M. Thomas Jr., pleaded guilty to a federal bribery charge on Monday and immediately resigned, adding to a pervasive feeling that corruption infests public life here.

Mr. Thomas, who was considered a strong potential candidate for mayor and who until recently was widely respected as council president, admitted taking as much as \$19,000 in bribes and kickbacks in 2002 from a well-connected local businessman and restaurateur who was trying to keep a city parking lot contract.

Mr. Thomas is the latest in a string of New Orleans public officials, past and present, who have been touched by federal corruption charges. In June, the former president of the school board admitted to taking bribes; Representative [William J. Jefferson](#), Democrat of Louisiana and this city's congressman, was accused by federal authorities of being at the center of a multinational bribery scheme; and a top aide to the former Mayor Marc H. Morial was sentenced to nine years in federal prison for his role in a plot to skim \$1 million from a city contract.

Some 30 school system employees have been indicted. And the United States attorney here, James B. Letten, said Monday that a long-running investigation into corruption at City Hall in the Morial administration, which has already yielded 16 convictions, would continue.

"It's just brazen down here," James Bernazzani, the [Federal Bureau of Investigation](#)'s special agent in charge, said at a news conference after Mr. Thomas entered his plea.

“In Louisiana they skim the cream, steal the milk, hijack the bottle and look for the cow,” said Mr. Bernazzani, who noted that his district ranked second in the nation in public corruption convictions and indictments — despite its relatively small population.

The conviction of Mr. Thomas, who is African-American, was especially startling as he had long been seen as one of New Orleans’s untainted political leaders, a bridge builder among the races, and — particularly after Hurricane Katrina — an eloquent voice for the city’s dispossessed. In recent months he had been a particularly insistent spokesman on the need to confront the city’s spiraling crime problem.

The competition to fill his now vacant at-large council seat could shift the racial dynamics in politics here, as his departure leaves the City Council evenly — and often bitterly — split along racial lines. In the last census, in 2006, the city was 58 percent black. The election of a white candidate to Mr. Thomas’s seat would transform politics here.

Mr. Thomas, 50, a hulking, easygoing son of the Lower Ninth Ward, spoke often for that badly stricken neighborhood after Hurricane Katrina, making sure its continuing plight was not forgotten. “It’s gone, baby,” he was reported to have said of the neighborhood two years ago, after the flooding.

His large following was evident in the crowded federal courtroom here on Monday, where many looked on grimly as Mr. Thomas, a 13-year veteran of the City Council, stood to enter his plea in a soft voice. The crowd later applauded Mr. Thomas when he emerged from the courtroom, and a woman called out, “I’m proud of you!”

Earlier, Judge Sarah S. Vance sternly admonished the councilman, calling his guilty plea “a body blow to a community” that was “reeling,” and saying it was “demoralizing to our citizens, who are desperate for a leader they can trust.” He faces a sentence of up to 10 years.

Mr. Thomas admitted taking the money from the local businessman, Stanford Barré, an intimate of Mr. Morial. Mr. Barré is at the center of the City Hall corruption investigation, and the owner of Pampy’s, a Creole restaurant in the Seventh Ward that was the top gathering spot for the black political elite in this city before the flood.

Mr. Morial, now president of the National Urban League, has not been charged.

As Mr. Morial's term ended in 2002, the authorities said, Mr. Barré became concerned that his company would lose a contract to run parking lots owned by the city in the French Quarter and the Faubourg Marigny neighborhood. He thought Mr. Thomas could help him keep the contract, they said. The councilman agreed in return for \$15,000, federal officials charged, and he sought additional kickbacks of \$3,000 to \$4,000 funneled through a friend, Joseph Jourdain. Mr. Jourdain has pleaded guilty to charges that he knew of the bribe.

"Corruption in New Orleans is endemic," said Mr. Letten, the federal prosecutor. "I think this simply tells us there is corruption on many levels, large scale and small scale."

Later, at a news conference, Mr. Thomas read from a prepared statement: "It was wrong, and I accept full responsibility for this action, and for using incredibly poor judgment."

Through tears, he added: "I cannot begin to describe the anguish I feel for disappointing you. You trusted me, and I have placed that trust in question. You have every right to be angry and suspicious. I am deeply sorry."

Allen Johnson contributed reporting.