

NC5 Investigates: General Sessions Court

## Tickets Fixed for Nashville's Best-Connected Drivers

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A NewsChannel 5 investigation uncovers what could become a major ticket-fixing scandal in the city of Nashville.

And it raises new questions about whether there's one set of laws for those with connections -- and another for the rest of us.

But unlike a ticket-fixing problem exposed by NewsChannel 5 Investigates three years ago, it's not the city's elected judges who are dismissing the tickets.

So who is it?

Our chief investigative reporter Phil Williams has an investigation more than six months in the making.



When you're out on the highway, the radar detector doesn't know who you are.

But when deputy juvenile court clerk Matt Drury got ticketed for speeding last year -- not once, but three times -- someone sure knew who he was.



Blake Freeman, defense attorney/judge

"I'm not sure what happened with all these specific tickets," Drury told Williams.

But court records show Drury got all three tickets dismissed without having to go to court or traffic school.

"I can tell you none of these tickets were given to any Metro employee by me to do anything with," Drury insisted.

"Were they given to anyone to do anything with?" Williams asked.



David Raybin, former prosecutor  
Drury appeared to search for an answer. "Were [they] given to anyone to do anything with? They have been taken care of."

And when legendary songwriter John Hiatt got ticketed for speeding, someone also took care of his ticket.

And the list of those who got out of speeding tickets goes on: the chaplain for the Tennessee Titans, a Titans cheerleader, a big-time Nashville music executive, a prominent defense lawyer and at least seven sheriff's department employees.

So who was looking out for them? Like Drury, none of them would say.

"I'm trying to find out who your ticket fixer is," Williams asked Drury.

"I don't have a ticket fixer," the Metro employee answered.

Still, when NewsChannel 5 analyzed tickets written in an 18-month period, we discovered all of those tickets were dismissed by defense attorneys -- defense attorneys who sometimes take the bench while Nashville's elected judges are off doing other things.

"Special judges have a special relationship with the court and the public and they have to act beyond reproach," said former prosecutor David Raybin.

And what stunned Raybin even more was the scope.

Out of almost 1,800 speeding tickets retired or dismissed by all Davidson County judges, 1,300 were dismissed by those attorneys sitting as special judges. That's almost three out of every four.

"Why are these tickets being fixed?" Raybin asked. "What's the incentive? Why does one person get their ticket fixed and someone else doesn't?"

Which are just the questions that we wanted to ask special judge Blake Freeman. Freeman has a law practice that advertises "legal services for traffic violations."

"I don't have any comment right now," Freeman said when Williams caught up with him.

"You're a defense attorney who helps people get out of speeding tickets," Williams noted.

"I represent a lot of folks, yes, sir," Freeman answered.

"How does it make sense that you would have the power to dismiss tickets?" Williams asked.

"I don't do that," Freeman insisted, as he got into his car and slammed the door.

But our investigation found dozens of dismissed speeding tickets with Freeman's initials -- in fact, over a hundred dismissed in just four days.

"Why is it you're afraid to answer questions about this?" Williams asked. But the defense attorney had no time for questions as he drove away. And when we went to his office in search of answers, Freeman decided to close for the day.

"Something is terribly wrong when to have stacks and stacks of traffic tickets being dismissed by special judges," Raybin said.

Take the day that one of Freeman's friends, Judge Aaron Holt, asked him to handle his traffic docket.

Court records show Freeman ruled on the cases scheduled in court that day, then he dismissed another 52 speeding tickets -- two of them for the husband of a clerk in the traffic violations bureau.

"You don't dismiss 52 tickets ex parte in the back room somewhere," Raybin said. "It's just not done."

And when we finally caught up with Freeman again, we also asked about another 31 speeding tickets he dismissed on a day he was just supposed to be hearing jail cases.

"You know, some of those dismissals could very well be informants that the police officers bring to the judge," Freeman said.

"Or it could not be," Williams replied. "It could a friend of somebody who wants a ticket fixed."

"You know, I doubt that," Freeman said.

But perhaps most troubling was the speeding ticket written to Donald Smith, a man Freeman had represented on another case.

"So why would you have dismissed a ticket for one of your own clients?" Williams asked.

Freeman answered, "Well, now, that's a good question."

"You cannot be a judge where your client is one of the litigants," Raybin said. "That's just a basic rule."

Freeman insisted that he did not realize that he had dismissed a ticket for a client.

"You've caught me doing something that probably I need to reset on a docket," he said.

Our investigation also found tickets dismissed by attorneys on days when there's no proof they were authorized to act as judges.

And, in other cases, tickets were dismissed -- but the clerk's office says it has no idea who did it.

Raybin says the DA's office needs to call in the Tennessee Bureau of Investigation to sort it all out.