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Ficano walks tightrope over Elder

Suspended deputy executive presents political challenge

By [Nancy Kaffer](#)



Elder

On Nov. 11, Deputy Wayne County Executive Azzam Elder is slated to return to work. Wayne County Executive Robert Ficano suspended him without pay on Oct. 14 for his role in authorizing a severance payment made to Turkia Awada Mullin, the county's former chief development officer.

Now, with the **FBI** investigating Wayne County, and Elder's records reportedly among those subpoenaed, it's unclear whether Elder can return to work and remain effective -- or if Ficano will welcome Elder back.

Ficano's censure of Elder came after an internal county investigation found that Elder was involved in authorizing a \$200,000 severance payment made to Mullin, who left the county to become CEO of the **Wayne County Airport Authority**.

Corporation Counsel Marianne Talon also was suspended without pay, and Ficano fired Tim Taylor, a county retiree who had a contract with the county.



Ficano

On Friday, Ficano issued a statement distancing himself from Mullin, saying that her leadership has been "compromised" and encouraging the airport authority board to act in the best interest of the airport and the region.

But it's also unclear how Elder affects Ficano's political future.

Detroit political consultant Steve Hood said Ficano has to clean house to stay politically viable.

"(Elder has) got to go," Hood said. "As this stuff keeps unfolding, he's got to go. Whether it's sooner or later, he has to go. Ficano has to fire him if he's going to salvage some kind of administration."

But firing Elder could hurt Ficano politically. Elder is an Arab-American, and the Arab-American community has supported Ficano politically, donating hundreds of thousands of dollars to his last re-election campaign.

Crain's placed two calls to a number listed as Elder's residence last week but did not reach him. Elder has been deputy executive since 2005 and is paid about \$151,000 annually.

Arab-American News Publisher Osama Siblani said that the Arab-American community has been following the situation closely.

Two weeks ago, Siblani invited Ficano to meet with Arab-American leaders at **Habib's Cuisine**, a restaurant in Dearborn, to discuss the ongoing severance scandal. Ficano wasn't available, Siblani said, so Elder came instead.

"The community was debating what was happening in Wayne County and were concerned that this issue was going to turn into an Arab issue," said Siblani, who is also treasurer of the **Arab-American Political Action Committee**.

"I assured them that we will be monitoring the situation. ... I know now today there is an investigation going on, that that investigation is going to conclude and be transparent. For us to speculate at this point is not in best interest of the community or the county."

Still, Siblani said, Elder's fate remains of concern to the community -- and how Ficano treats Elder will be watched.

"If Ficano fired Azzam, I think he has to say why he's doing it," Siblani said. "If he's firing him because of this particular incident, I strongly believe 30 days suspension

is heavy-handed for sloppy work. If in the investigation it is revealed that Azzam or anyone else has been involved in anything illegal, then Azzam must be punished.

"But if Ficano, in order to save his administration, takes Azzam as a scapegoat, I think we would be very disappointed. But if Azzam has done something wrong, he needs to tell us, and everyone in the county, and everyone involved."

Siblani said he doesn't believe Ficano is the kind of person to place blame where it's not warranted.

"He is a person who has been sincere, and his relationship with the Arab community has been very deep. Not with one organization or person in the Arab community -- he has support all over the Arab community, deep and wide."

Ali Hammoud, an attorney with the Detroit-based **Barnett Law Group PC** and vice president of AAPAC, was careful to note his concern that the situation in Wayne County not be seen as an Arab-American issue.

"We believe it's a Wayne County issue for the executive office," he said.

As to whether Elder becomes political collateral, "That's a decision Wayne County Executive Robert Ficano will have to make," Hammoud said. "If he feels that Azzam did something wrong, then it's his decision to make. The community has not come to a consensus about the relationship between the parties.

"We feel like the Detroit metro area is the largest population of Arab-Americans outside of the Middle East, and it just happens that two people in the executive office (Elder and Mullin) are Arab-Americans."

A politician in Ficano's position can weather fallout if he makes the right moves, **University of Michigan-Dearborn** political science professor Ronald Stockton said, speaking generally of politics and not specifically of Ficano's administration. Stockton noted that Elder is a former student.

"Ficano is very popular in the Arab-American community, very frequently a guest speaker at annual dinners or fundraising events," Stockton said. "There's an old art

form involved in how you handle this. If you have a key person from the community and you have to get rid of that person, you hire someone else from the community ... you remove them but very quickly replace them with someone else, so the damage is minimized to supporters of that individual."

From an executive standpoint, a top-level shake-up is the only way for Ficano to maintain credibility, said management consultant Kenneth Dalto, of the Farmington Hills-based firm **Kenneth J. Dalto and Associates**.

"I think maybe three weeks ago (Elder) would have been able to (remain with the county), but the probes by the FBI and the media have gone so much further than that, with contracts and with friends of friends ... this is very similar to a corporate situation," Dalto said. "With this kind of widespread corporate irregularities, top management would have to be shaken up. The point people or operating officers would have to be removed. It's too far-reaching. There may have to be a complete restructuring of how county business is done."

Part of the problem, he said, is that FBI investigations can take years. And further revelations could appear in the media.

"There will be so much time spent by the top management on firefighting, gathering information, answering questions by the media and others," he said. "There will be effectively no management for a period of time. It's going to harm the message considerably."

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