

O'Rourke expresses sorrow over charge

By Gary Scharrer
Times staff writer

County Judge Pat O'Rourke got socked with political embarrassment, and "a pure fluke" clobbered Sheriff Capt. Willie Hill with legal problems, a somber O'Rourke said Friday about his friend's indictment.

Both played a peripheral part eight months ago when Sheriff Deputies Jim Boykin and Dwight Jefferson found a powdery substance they suspected to be cocaine or heroin inside O'Rourke's vehicle. They took the vehicle to install a two-way radio while the freshman county judge was out of town. Hill was at home when the two deputies came to him, asking how they should handle the discovery.

The captain, figuring a political enemy was trying to frame O'Rourke, told the deputies to flush the powder down a toilet. That decision caused an El Paso grand jury to indict Hill on misdemeanor charges of tampering with evidence and official misconduct.

"Perhaps it was an error in judgment but, given the circumstances, it would be a darn tough call," O'Rourke said about Hill's decision.

The beleaguered Sheriff's Department had been torn apart by the consecutive ouster of two sheriffs convicted on misconduct charges, and Sheriff Mike Davis had taken office just two months before the alleged drug discovery.

"He made a very critical decision in that department's history," O'Rourke said about Hill. Considering those internal problems, Hill "must have thought

his decision was just and proper."

Hill's personal and professional integrity always kept him "above controversy," O'Rourke said.

"Because he's a good man, it would be an injustice if Willie were to suffer grievous consequences from this whole episode. ... You have an honest and honorable man implicated by a pure fluke," O'Rourke said. "And that's just damn right not fair."

O'Rourke pledged to do whatever he can to help Hill through his legal problems so he can restore a law enforcement career.

While O'Rourke claims publicity from the case has damaged him politically, he said Hill "has suffered equally as hard as I have or more perhaps. That's yet to be determined."

Boykin, whose 70-minute testimony before the grand jury was longer than any other, expressed ambivalent feelings about the outcome. Boykin was elated when his wife, Sieglinde, told him the grand jury decided not to indict him. But he felt sorrow and sympathy for Hill.

"That weighs heavy in my heart. I wish (Hill) could have a no bill too," Boykin said. "I just hope that everything works out in the end for him."

The Vietnam veteran entered the grand jury room Thursday, nervous but optimistic.

"It's really a thrill to know the system does work," Boykin said. "I'll tell you, we have great people in El Paso. That's why I had faith and confidence in that grand jury ... I just thank the Almighty upstairs that he blessed me."