



## The Star-Ledger

### Getting off easy in Essex

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After Tenafly Councilman Jeffrey Romano was caught with 40 envelopes of heroin outside a drug-infested Newark housing project, Essex County Prosecutor Paula Dow held a press conference -- not something she normally does in low-level drug cases -- and seemed to suggest that suburbanites like Romano were partly responsible for the inner-city drug scourge. Talking tough, she suggested suburbanites who come to urban areas to buy drugs would be dealt with harshly.

Turns out all that talk was mostly bluster. This week Romano, who had been arrested on five prior occasions, four of which led to convictions in other states, was spared jail time altogether. Under the terms of a plea deal worked out by the Essex County Prosecutor's Office, Romano, who has resigned his council seat, got five years' probation and will have to do 150 hours of community service. When he was sentenced, prosecutors didn't even argue for incarceration.

While we agree that drug treatment is better than filling prisons with addicts, one has to wonder whether Romano got the benefit of more sympathy than an inner-city drug user would.

Moreover, though Romano is a drug addict, his actions were not simply those of a junkie trying to get a fix. In a stunning display of audacity, he drove to Bradley Court, a Newark housing project known for drug deals and homicides, in a 2006 Corvette. While his black passenger jumped out of the car to purchase the drugs, he remained behind in the car. When the police pulled him over as he drove away, he whipped out his cheesy municipal badge in hopes it would be enough to keep him from being arrested. Fortunately it wasn't. After the arrest, he continued getting high, according to a presentencing report.

Initially, prosecutors seemed ready to pull out all the stops to make an example of Romano. They got an indictment charging him with official misconduct, conspiracy to violate the narcotics laws, third-degree possession of drugs, possession with intent to distribute and possession within 500 feet of a public housing project. If convicted on all those counts, he would have faced 30 years behind bars. Instead, he got zero.

What happened to the no-nonsense Dow who boldly declared, "I hope this sends a message to the next suburbanite who drives into Newark to buy drugs. If we catch you, I will charge you and you can tell your story to the Essex County jurors"?

Sadly, jurors in Essex County did not get a chance to decide whether Romano was guilty as charged.

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