Prosecutors have found fertile ground in this city's commission chambers.

A former commissioner accused of stealing from his campaign account. A former mayor charged with voting on a project benefiting a company he received income from. A suspended commissioner who, even though she abstained from voting, is charged with not revealing her conflict of interest.

The alleged crimes pale against some bribery and misconduct deeds uncovered elsewhere in Broward and Palm Beach counties in recent years, but to many observers they typify a long-standing disregard for the rules which permeated how city business operated.

"It's symptomatic of anybody and everybody that's been in office too many years. They get a little cocky and think they can get away with these things," said Century Village East resident Arnold Paglia. "I think more is going to come. These cases are beginning to awaken people."

Paglia's thoughts regarding this month's charges against suspended Commissioner Sylvia Poitier — and the 2008 charges against former Commissioner Steve Gonot and former Mayor Al Capellini — are spot-on with ethics experts.

"In our examination of these things, we find there's a greater propensity to do wrong the longer you're in office," said Norm Ostrau, director of Florida Atlantic University's Public Ethics Academy. "You take leeway with those rules."

Other communities that have been targets of investigations include Tamarac, where a mayor and commissioner have been charged and suspended and a former commissioner charged, all caught up in similar allegations that they took bribes from developers Bruce and Shawn Chait in exchange for votes in favor of their projects.

In Palm Beach County, honest services fraud charges tripped up three county commissioners and a fourth pleaded guilty to extortion and perjury.

In Deerfield Beach, no single theme predominates.
Poitier, 75, a former county commissioner who has been in one office or another for most of the past 40 years, abstained from voting on several issues involving the Westside Deerfield Businessmen Association, but prosecutors said she did not disclose a conflict of interest involving her brother.

Gonot, 54, whose case is scheduled to go to trial May 2, is charged with stealing $5,135 from his mayoral campaign account for personal use. He was in office for almost eight years and planned to run for mayor because he was term-limited as a commissioner.

Capellini, 63, spent 20 years as mayor or commissioner. He is charged with unlawful compensation for voting on a project in which he was a paid consultant — even though the project already had the support of the city's four commissioners. He has been unsuccessful so far in getting the charge dismissed. No trial date has been set.

Former U.S. Attorney Kendall Coffey, now a Miami attorney, said the recent misdemeanor charges against Poitier show a "zero tolerance philosophy" that can encourage would-be informants that their complaints will be listened to.

"Prosecutors have sent a clear message that it doesn't have to be videotape of $100,000 in a paper bag," Coffey said. "Even misdemeanors are going to be accorded the full authority of the law in order to ensure the integrity of public officials."

Poitier is charged with five counts of falsifying public records. Prosecutors said she failed to disclose the conflict of interest she had from her brother loaning $46,000 to the WDBA. Her brother's loan has never been repaid.

"I don't think we're more corrupt," said activist Bett Willett, one of many who have taken to blogging about city issues. "I think people are annoyed with it more. People are wanting more accountability from their commissioners."

Willett said the attitude of prosecutors has also changed. She remembers sending in complaints years ago that went nowhere.

"I think the feds have started it," Willett said. "I think their coming in made our law enforcement people look weak and embarrassingly inefficient."

State prosecutors listened when blogger and activist Chaz Stevens filed his complaints, which initiated the investigations that led to charges against all three Deerfield Beach officials — although Stevens has alleged far worse crimes involving Poitier.

"If you want to see the way it's done wrongly, come to Deerfield Beach," said Stevens, who said the Internet gives activists a microphone that officials cannot cut off. "I know how to take advantage of the new media. … Now we're on an even playing field."