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The judge draws a line

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The words "Liberty and Prosperity" are inscribed on the state seal of New Jersey, but they might just as well be "Go Along to Get Along."

It's what we do in New Jersey, and it's a good part of why the state is in such a mess.

The "go along to get along" mentality plays out in campaign donations from law firms, engineers and other professionals who then get juicy contracts for government work.

It's why public officials help each other -- be the gesture an appointment to another pension-padding post or a disinclination to pursue ethics charges in the Legislature. They never know when they might need a return favor.

Another variation of "go along to get along" involves officials who get caught snarfing up tax dollars at the public trough. They get indicted -- most often by federal authorities -- and then plead guilty in return for light sentences. A few months in a federal lockup, a few more in a halfway house and then back to New Jersey and its forgiving ways.

This week, a man named William Walls said enough is enough.

Walls, a senior U.S. district judge, rejected prosecutors' pleas for a lenient sentence for the former mayor of Ocean Township, who also happens to be a former city manager of Asbury Park. The request for a lighter sentence was made because Terrance Weldon has been cooperating in the investigations of other officials.

Walls wasn't moved.

Instead, saying he was amazed at the parade of New Jersey politicians "hell-bent on corruption," Walls ordered Weldon -- who, in the words of federal prosecutors, ran his town with a "staggering degree of corruption" -- to prison for nearly five years.

We understand the federal prosecutors' argument that offering a lighter sentence in return for cooperation helps them go after others.

But we like Walls' argument better: "Then tell those people not to commit crimes. And tell those agents to work harder."

For once, someone wasn't convinced that the best way to get along was to go along.

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