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Wesley Snipes cites Klan fear in Ocala trial venue

November 9, 2007 | By Sarah Langbein, Sentinel Staff Writer

Actor Wesley Snipes wants his upcoming tax-evasion trial moved out of a federal courtroom in Ocala, calling the community a "hotbed" for Ku Klux Klan activity.

In a motion filed earlier this week, Snipes asked that his case be heard in a more diverse area, such as his hometown of Orlando or in New York City, where he lived from October 2000 to April 2005.

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The black actor's defense team called Ocala the "most racially discriminatory venue available . . . with the best possibility of an all-white Southern jury."

His attorneys maintain that the majority of people in Ocala are good-hearted and fair -- but said they fear that pockets of racism will taint the jury pool.

"Wes never said that everybody in Ocala is racist," attorney Robert Barnes said Thursday.

Ocala leaders and community members called the motion's claims preposterous and disappointing, especially since Snipes has never lived there.

"Based on his close ties to the community, I guess Mr. Snipes is in a better position to observe the character of our community," Ocala City Council President Pro Tem Charles Ruse Jr. said facetiously.

Jaye Baillie, president and chief executive officer of the Ocala/Marion County Chamber of Commerce, called Snipes' description of the area a character assassination of a "dynamic and compassionate" place to live.

"The motion is an affront to our community and our judicial system," Baillie said. "We are a remarkable community, and it's unfortunate to have this broad-brush accusation placed with no merit."

Snipes' legal team commissioned a survey of potential jurors in Ocala and New York. The Public Opinion Research Laboratory of the University of North Florida contacted 353 voters in Ocala and 226 in New York.

The survey found a "greater level of racial bias and prejudice toward Snipes" in Ocala, according to a court document. It also showed that 63.2 percent of those polled in Ocala say the Confederate flag is a sign of pride rather than prejudice.

The U.S. Attorney's Office said it did not have any comment on the motion and planned to respond in court.

Meanwhile, Ocala residents expressed surprise about the way their hometown was being portrayed by Snipes.

"The best resource we have here is our people," said Pete Tesch, president and chief executive officer of the Ocala Marion County Economic Development Corp. "It just hurts us as a community."

Last month, Snipes dumped his entire legal team just a week and a half before his trial was set to start. He accused high-profile lawyer Jim Martin of spending too much of his time and resources representing Michael Vick, the Atlanta Falcons quarterback charged in a dogfighting ring.

The Snipes trial has been delayed until early next year.

Snipes, a former Isleworth resident and Jones High School alumnus, was indicted in late 2006 with Venice accountant Doug Rosile and former Lake County anti-tax crusader Eddie Ray Kahn.

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