

PROBE

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government informant, said investigators told him during the undercover operation that Banks was the ultimate target.

During an hour-long telephone interview this week, Johnson said his assignment was to "infiltrate" the Peoria drug scene and tape-record conversations with the known or suspected drug dealers believed to be linked to Banks.

Johnson said investigators twice briefed him on the operation but never articulated their reasons for suspecting that Banks has financed drug trafficking.

However, Johnson said investigators led him to believe that the suspicion of Banks centers on the vast amount of federal funding provided his agency, the Community Action Agency.

"The only way to stop this trafficking is to hit the source. I mean money talks," he said. "And the man undoubtedly has access to large amounts of money."

As executive director of the Community Action Agency, Banks, 41, is the top administrator of an organization that receives about \$2.5 million in federal funds each year to provide a wide range of services in Peoria.

Johnson began his undercover work for the FBI in April, when he established contact with various known and suspected drug dealers. While wearing a concealed tape-recorder, he proceeded to carry out a marijuana sale using 100 pounds of

government-supplied cannabis.

The initial transactions in May led to the arrests of a dozen people from Peoria and Chicago. Two of those people eventually had their charges dismissed and nine others pleaded guilty to drug conspiracy charges.

Assistant U.S. Attorney Mark Stuann confirmed this week that some of the guilty pleas were negotiated by the government in return for the conspirators' cooperation with an ongoing investigation.

But Stuann declined to say whether that investigation is centered on Banks or the suspected use of federal funds in drug trafficking.

"We're interested in investigating narcotics trafficking, regardless of the source of money," he said. "I couldn't confirm that we're looking for any one person."

The one conspirator who has refused to cooperate with the FBI is Tom Adams, a 37-year-old Peoria man who admits to past drug dealings and describes himself as a longtime personal friend of Banks.

Adams confirmed this week that investigators sought his cooperation, but he was reluctant to comment further because he hopes to overturn his conviction based on the charge that he was entrapped by investigators overzealously pursuing Banks.

At one point after his arrest in May, Adams said, investigators interrogating him suggested that he "take a big chunk of this marijuana over to Banks' house for us."

Adams, who says he stopped trafficking drugs more than a year ago, was convicted last week after a three-day trial — the only trial to re-

sult from the arrests in May and apparently something on which the FBI had not counted.

Johnson called Adams' trial "an unexpected hassle" because investigators were interested only in his perceived ability to lead them to Banks.

Adams "has no access to federal funds other than the people he knows," Johnson said. "His involvement was to introduce me to certain people, to help me infiltrate."

During Adams' trial, government prosecutors were not allowed to edit a conversation secretly tape-recorded by Johnson and entered as evidence in Adams' prosecution. The recording was played in its entirety during the trial and included several references to Banks by name.

In the conversation, while responding to Johnson's request for help carrying out a drug deal, Adams said of Banks: "He's got more at stake, and he only does his personal thing. He don't do — he ain't really into it for the money. Government, you know."

Banks said Thursday he does not know why his name came up during that conversation. He stressed that he has never been involved in drug trafficking and said he knows Adams only because they attend the same church.

Johnson, who describes his one-time relationship with Adams as strictly business, said he does not know Banks at all.

"The man could be totally straight, and he could be a crook," Johnson said. "Money does strange things to people. It brings out the worst."

In addition to his position as head of the Community Action Agency, Banks has been active in other local organizations, including the Central Illinois Private Industry Council and the Peoria Economic Development Association.

A longtime community activist, he made an unsuccessful bid for a seat on the Peoria City Council in 1980.

That was followed in 1984 by an unsuccessful city council campaign by his wife, Joyce, who works for the Illinois attorney general's office and once served as the local Democratic state central committeewoman.

Joyce Banks said this week she is "amazed" to learn of the FBI investigation because her husband has never been involved in drug trafficking.

"We've been married 12 years, and I'm not so naive that I wouldn't know it," she said.

Joyce Banks also said her husband has taken an indefinite sick leave from the Community Action Agency because he is still recovering from a recent three-week stay in the hospital.

McFarland Bragg, a longtime associate serving as acting director of the agency, said he believes federal authorities are trying to make Banks a scapegoat for rampant drug trafficking in Peoria — much of which, Bragg said, occurs right across the street from his agency at the Warner Homes public-housing complex.

"You can go to Warner Homes right now and get whatever you want," he said. "And it don't have nothing to do with Mike Banks."