

Gibson drug suspects granted bond reduction

By Dan Copp Staff Writer

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A judge today reduced the bonds of two women accused of participating in a major drug trafficking operation in Gibson.

Chantal Ruffin, 28, and Sharon Ruffin, 47, both of Gibson, were in Hattiesburg, Miss., where they were arrested last month on warrants from Terrebonne Parish, prosecutors said.

Beginning, Oct. 4, a joint law enforcement operation involving the Terrebonne Sheriff's Office, State Police and Houma Police Department seized 18 pounds of marijuana, 2,500 Xanax pills, 300 Ecstasy pills and more than \$60,000 in cash and from various bank accounts after searching 11 homes throughout Terrebonne, St. Mary and East Baton Rouge parishes, authorities said.

Agents also seized two ounces of methamphetamine, one ounce of cocaine, two cars, an SUV, an AR-15 rifle, six handguns and a shotgun, the Sheriff's Office said.

During a bond reduction hearing Wednesday in District Judge Johnny Walker's courtroom, attorneys for both women asked for a reduction to their clients' \$250,000 bonds.

Chantal Ruffin's Baton Rouge lawyer, Thomas Damico, contended that his client was not a flight risk because she was eight months pregnant when she was arrested and was currently in a hospital giving birth.

Damico suggested an ankle monitor for his client would suffice so that she could care for her newborn while on house arrest.

Prosecutor Jason Lyons objected to the bond reduction, citing Chantal Ruffin's history of failing to appear in court and lengthy criminal record. Both of her prior convictions were for marijuana distribution charges, Lyons said.

Chantal Ruffin faces nine counts of drug-related charges in connection to the Gibson operation, authorities said.

After hearing arguments from both sides, Walker reduced Chantal Ruffin's bond to \$150,000 on the condition that if she posts bond she must remain in Terrebonne Parish, wear an ankle monitor and make all of her court appearances.

The judge also reduced Sharon Ruffin's bond to \$50,000 on the condition she remains in in the parish and makes all upcoming court appearances.

Sharon Ruffin's Houma attorney, Max Smitko, maintained that his client is innocent. Sharon Ruffin, who has no prior felony convictions, was charged with illegal possession of stolen firearms, dog fighting and obstruction of justice by tampering with evidence.

"I've seen much severe offenses with a lower bond amount than what Ms. Ruffin has," Smitko said. "She feels like she's a pawn in the state's chess game. She's not a criminal."

The alleged drug-trafficking organization was transporting large quantities of marijuana, cocaine and prescription pills from Texas into Louisiana and were supplying multiple levels of distributors from the top of the distribution chain all the way to consumers in Terrebonne and St. Mary parishes, as well as other areas, investigators said.

A trial for the suspects has been set for March 19.

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