

Drug cases less appealing for lawyers

By Kurt Chandler
Staff Writer

It's hard-luck stories like Joe Friedberg's that are turning defense lawyers off to drug cases.

Last spring, Minneapolis lawyer Friedberg was hired to defend Ralph (Plukey) Duke, who is standing trial in St. Paul for allegedly operating one of the biggest drug operations ever uncovered in Minnesota. For his services, Friedberg in August was de-

Tough penalties, seizure laws imperil fees

ed a home in Los Angeles, owned, he maintains, by a friend of Duke's. Friedberg sold the luxury home and placed his profits in escrow.

But a month later, the U.S. government seized the property and Friedberg's profits, claiming the house actually was bought with drug money laundered by Duke, and therefore

subject to federal forfeiture laws.

Friedberg said he had no reason to believe that the house was "tainted," and has hired his own attorney to challenge the seizure. If he's unsuccessful, Friedberg stands to lose \$100,000, the bulk of his retainer, he said.

Throughout the decade, the war on drugs has brought good business to criminal defense lawyers. But these days, drug cases are seen as more of a bother than a boon by some of the Twin Cities' top attorneys. New seizure laws, tougher penalties and a prevailing antidrug sentiment have made defending drug dealers a losing proposition, especially in Minneso-

ta's federal courts, where the U.S. government wins at least nine out of 10 cases.

"It ain't fun to try federal drug cases," Friedberg said. "The jury hates the defendant. The judge hates the defendant. The prosecutor hates the defendant." And fees are becoming harder and harder to retain.

Some civil libertarians find this trou-

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