

[By Pete Kasperowicz](#)

The Department of Justice is investigating banks for possible antitrust law violations in regards to an attempt earlier this year to raise debit card fees.

The DOJ is looking to see if the financial institutions acted in concert as they tried — unsuccessfully — to impose the fees, according to a letter sent to Rep. Peter Welch (D-Vt.) last week.

"The Department of Justice is reviewing the statements and actions by banks and their trade associations regarding possible increases in consumer fees for using debit cards," Assistant Attorney General Ronald Weich wrote in a [Nov. 16 letter](#). "Please be assured that if it finds that individuals, banks or other parties may have violated antitrust laws, the department will take appropriate action."

The DOJ letter is a response to a Welch letter from October that asked the attorney general to examine possible antitrust violations. Welch welcomed the letter as a hurdle that banks would face in raising fees on consumers, which he and many other Democrats opposed.

"While big banks like Bank of America beat a hasty retreat on their debit card fee strategies, I have no doubt that they will continue their quest to dig deeper into the pockets of struggling consumers," Welch said. "As they consider their next move, they should be aware that there is a cop actively on the beat."

The DOJ letter stressed that it has a "strong interest" in ensuring vigorous competition among banks, and said it has pursued criminal and civil cases in the industry. It noted that DOJ has charged bankers and levied fines against banks like JPMorgan Chase and Bank of America for rigging bids in the municipal bond derivatives market.

The letter also noted that in 2010, DOJ filed a civil suit against Visa, MasterCard and American Express to block rules preventing merchants from telling consumers about how the use of credit cards raises costs.