

Judge's ruling may open way to more utility fraud charges

By Kathy Parrish
staff writer

Both sides won points in an unusual courtroom battle between the Michigan attorney general and Oakland County prosecutor.

The big losers could be several area businessmen who now may be charged with conspiring to commit utility fraud.

"We have a potential number of other charges—at least five others," said assistant attorney general Mark Blumer, declining to say which businesses are targets.

But mentioned often during the three-and-a-half-day trial as possible "co-conspirators" were two Farmington Hills auto dealers. Named were William Cook, who owns Bill Cook Buick Inc., and Robert (Saks) Mechigan, owner of Bob Saks Olds. Mechigan is being prosecuted in Wayne County on utility fraud charges.

CIRCUIT JUDGE Judge George LaPlata of Oakland County Tuesday granted the attorney general's request to alter utility tamperer William Jones' May 12, 1983 guilty plea. His plea of obtaining more than \$100 under false pretenses was changed to conspiracy to defraud.

Named in the motion was William Cook, with whom Jones says he conspired to cut Cook's dealership electric bill to \$8.50 a month. The defendant also said he slowed the electric meter at Bob Saks Olds.

Now on probation, Jones won't serve jail time for the four-year felony because of "agreements he made with law officials."

WHILE TAKING the rare action requested by the attorney general, LaPlata also gave credit to the county prosecutor. The judge said Jones was properly represented by his attorney at the earlier hearing. LaPlata also agreed with the prosecutor that the "credibility of Jones is certainly suspect."

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— Mark Blumer
assistant Atty. General



Judge George LaPlata
OK's plea change

The Taylor man said he agreed to the false pretenses charge out of fear of further prosecution by the Oakland County prosecutor's office, with which he was cooperating.

Oakland County authorities said they declined to press charges against the businessmen whose meters Jones altered because he is an unreliable witness.

MICHIGAN'S ATTORNEY General entered the case at the request of Michigan State Police, who are handling the statewide utility fraud investigation.

State intervention came following disclosures that Oakland Prosecutor L. Brooks Patterson received campaign donations from Mechigan and other car dealers.

While opposed to the state intervening in the one-and-a-half-year-old case, Oakland County's chief assistant prosecutor felt LaPlata's ruling was fair.

"We had our day in court," said Richard Thompson, who handled the proceedings himself. "We showed Jones is an incredible witness."

DISPUTES SITTING at the same small table in LaPlata's courtroom, Thompson and Blumer were at odds throughout the hearing. They even argued at the trial's beginning over which law enforcement official should represent the people of Michigan—the attorney general or county prosecutor.

At one point, the assistant attorney general objected to a State Police polygraph examiner's testifying about lie detector tests Jones failed. Polygraph tests are not admissible in courtrooms as proof of innocence or guilt.

"It speaks little to the position of the at-

torney general that this information should not be introduced," said Thompson. "It seems to me a very relevant part of what transpired."

In his closing argument, Blumer charged county officials with attempting to discredit Jones because of a "vendetta" against the State Police.

"What we have here is the Oakland County prosecutor's office so intent on obtaining a conviction of Mr. Jones that they lost sight of justice in this case," Blumer said.

FOLLOWING THE hearing, Blumer said he regretted having to fight it out in court with a county prosecutor. "It was very uncomfortable because I am a law enforcement official not just by vocation but by avocation," explained the assistant attorney general, adding he could never be a defense attorney.

"I found myself in an almost untenable position. I work with the Oakland County prosecutor's office and have a great deal of respect for them."

But Thompson said he believes the court action grew out of a political— not professional—dispute between state Attorney General Frank Kelley and his 1982 political opponent, Oakland Prosecutor L. Brooks Patterson.

The chief assistant prosecutor said he'll be watching to see if the state charges all business owners suspected of utility fraud or just the auto dealers.

"The auto dealers supported Patterson in his race against Kelly. I think the attorney general is indicating to them they made a mistake," said Thompson.

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Thursday, January 31, 1985 O&E

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Blanchard budget praised

David Adamany, president of Wayne State University, has praised Gov. James J. Blanchard's 1985-86 budget recommendations, noting this is the "third year in a row that Gov. Blanchard has given a high budget priority to education."

"The national image of Michigan as a good state for higher education has improved dramatically over the past two years," Adamany said.

"First, the state has taken the difficult but important steps necessary to stabilize its financial situation. Second, the governor and Legislature have given investment in higher education a higher priority in the state budget."

ADAMANY POINTED to the governor's proposed research excellence fund and the new student work-study program as examples of important new state investments in education.

"In order to attend school," he said, "75 percent of our students need to work. The work-study program will allow more of our commuting students to find work on campus and thus enable a better fit between their dual worlds of work and study."

Concerning the research excellence fund, Adamany said the governor's Commission on the Future of Higher Education correctly identified Wayne State as a nationally recognized research university, but one which is still in development.

"WE ATTRACT more than \$20 million annually in external research support, mostly from the federal government. Our potential to do significantly better, however, will be greatly enhanced if the state will support our developing centers of excellence."

Adamany was impressed by the governor's efforts to hold down tuition costs, noting WSU is the only Michigan public university to freeze tuition in both of the last two years.

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