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3 plea deals wrap up police corruption case

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Three former police officers have pleaded no contest to charges stemming from their alleged role in a corruption case involving members of the Romulus Police Department.

On Tuesday, former detective sergeant Richard Balzer pleaded no contest to one count of embezzlement by a public official and misconduct in office, while former detectives Richard Landry and Donald Hopkins plead no contest to one count of embezzlement by a public official.

Charges, including conducting criminal enterprise, criminal enterprise/conspiracy and uttering and publishing and neglect of duty, were dismissed in return for their pleas.

A no contest plea isn't an admission of guilt.

According to the Wayne County Prosecutor's Office, restitution will be determined and the three men will lose their certification to be employed as police officers. They will be sentenced by Judge Michael Hathaway on Oct. 29.

A fourth defendant, former police chief Michael St. Andre of Garden City, faces up to 20 years in prison after pleading guilty to one count each of embezzlement by a public official, misconduct in office and conducting a criminal enterprise. He will be in Judge Hathaway's courtroom on Friday, Oct. 17, for sentencing.

The Wayne County Prosecutor's Office dropped seven other felony charges in exchange for his plea. St. Andre had been a 28-year

veteran of the police department.

In all, six police officers and St. Andre's wife, Sandra Vlaz-St. Andre, were charged in the case, which stemmed from an investigation by the Michigan State Police into allegations of misconduct, corruption and embezzlement of drug forfeiture funds by members of the Romulus Police Department's Special Investigation Unit.

According to the Wayne County Prosecutor's Office, Michael St. Andre directed a probe of liquor license violations, prostitution and narcotics trafficking at the Landing Strip Bar in Romulus and Subi's Place in Southgate, but during the investigation officers embezzled drug forfeiture money, solicited prostitutes and made false police reports.

The St. Andres also were accused of using police forfeiture funds to both purchase and operate Always Tan at 33712 Ford in Westland. In February, Vlaz-St. Andre was sentenced to 7-20 years in prison after being found guilty of acquiring and maintaining a criminal enterprise and criminal enterprise conspiracy, filing fraudulent tax returns and receiving and concealing stolen property.

In April, Droege was sentenced to 18 months probation after being found guilty of misconduct in office and neglect of duty. Channells also was found guilty of two counts of misconduct in office and neglect of duty and sentenced to three years probation.

By Sue Mason

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