

Grand jury to hear evidence Monday on missing funds

Council members, city officials expect to give testimony

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OWENSVILLE—The mayor, councilmen and other city officials are among witnesses expected to be called Monday when a grand jury begins hearing evidence that funds are missing from Municipal Court.

The grand jury will decide if allegations that nearly \$5,000 was stolen from court funds in fiscal years 1993 and 1994 justify filing criminal charges. Those allegations were contained in a 1994 report by the State Auditor's Office.

After an audit of municipal courts in the 20th Judicial Circuit that year, state auditors said \$4,994 was missing from Owensville Municipal Court funds. Auditors alleged that the missing money was stolen and turned

their findings over to Gasconade County Prosecuting Attorney John Berkemeyer.

Although never charged, City Clerk Bridget Hengstenberg, who was responsible for court funds, was the target of a subsequent investigation and next week's grand jury hearings into the 18-month-old allegations.

But council members questioned why the alleged shortage was not discovered in an audit of the city eight months earlier, also conducted by the State Auditor's Office. Independent annual audits by firms hired by the council also did not show any court funds missing, they said.

Mayor Roxana Riefer and council members continue to support Hengstenberg, who has denied taking funds from municipal court accounts.

"The council still supports Bridget and I support the council," Riefer said earlier last month. "I don't believe she took any money. Look how many clerks we had before her, and when we moved city hall, we found

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old envelopes with money in them that had never gone through court."

Next week's grand jury will be directed Cole County Assistant Prosecutor William Tackett, who was named special prosecutor. Tackett also conducted the last grand jury investigation in Gasconade County four years ago. He also conducted an investigation into apparently unfounded allegations of misuse of county property by Sheriff Robert Mathis in 1995.

Tackett scheduled three days (Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday) for the grand jury investigation. But sources say he hopes to complete the hearings in one day.