

Owensville city clerk enters no-contest plea

By STEVE FRIEDMAN
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HERMANN — Turning down her right to a jury trial, Owensville City Clerk Bridget Hengstenberg accepted a sentence of five years supervised probation and restitution for the nearly \$5,000 she is accused of stealing from city coffers over a two-year period.

Mrs. Hengstenberg agreed to a no-contest plea in a hearing before Gasconade County Circuit Judge John Brackmann Monday afternoon.

Brackmann also agreed to suspend the sentence after five years if she obeys terms of the sentence; violations could result in a seven-year prison term.

A December 1994 Missouri auditor's report revealed \$4,994 missing in an audit of the city's municipal court covering fiscal years 1992-94. The auditor's office relayed its findings to the Gasconade County prosecutor's office, which forwarded the investigation to the Missouri Highway Patrol.

In early July, a Gasconade County grand jury took fewer than five minutes to indict her in connection with the missing funds, a Class C felony stealing charge.

Cole County Assistant Prosecutor Bill Tackett, special prosecutor in the case, said Mrs. Hengstenberg was able to redistribute the municipal court money through a check substitution scheme.

Because of Mrs. Hengstenberg's no contest plea, Tackett was able to introduce evidence and unsworn witnesses to establish her guilt. He said afterward he was able to show 90 percent of the evidence against her during the proceeding, including a confession that she stole at least \$2,000 of the

missing money.

"Obviously, the evidence was strong enough that (Brackmann) felt we didn't need to go any further with our case," he said. "There were so many witnesses and so much evidence that he felt it was proper to shut the remaining evidence off."

Dating back to February, Owensville city officials have stood behind Mrs. Hengstenberg even before charges against her were pursued. The city believed she was being made a scapegoat for years of poor record keeping for which she was not directly responsible. The city went through five city clerks since 1988, and officials believed records were not kept correctly prior to Mrs. Hengstenberg.

But John Blattel, an audit manager with the state auditor's office, confirmed to Tackett previous clerks or poor record keeping did not result in the missing funds.

Presently, Mrs. Hengstenberg is utilities manager with the city, a position that does not carry financial responsibilities. Mayor Roxana Riefer said after Monday's hearing it would be up to the Board of Aldermen to decide if Mrs. Hengstenberg remains with the city.

"I stand behind any council decision," Mrs. Riefer said, but she would not comment specifically on any action the city could take regarding her employment.

Brackmann told Mrs. Hengstenberg during the hearing he recognized the support the community has for her despite the betrayal of their trust. "Owensville is the victim in this but Owensville is still your friend," he said. "You're luckier than most."