

FIRST GLANCE

Owensville city clerk arraigned

By STEVE FRIEDMAN
News Tribune

It took a Gasconade County grand jury fewer than five minutes Monday afternoon to indict Owensville City Clerk Bridget Hengstenberg for allegedly stealing about \$5,000 from the city's municipal court.

The Missouri Auditor's office in December 1994 revealed the money missing in a two-year audit report.

The grand jury, assembled by the Gasconade County circuit court, charged Ms. Hengstenberg with the theft in an indictment opened Monday at the county courthouse in Hermann.

Ms. Hengstenberg did not enter a plea to the charges during an arraignment this morning before Associate Circuit Judge Ralph Puchta for charges of Class C felony stealing.

She is scheduled for circuit court arraignment on Aug. 19 before Judge John Brackmann. She is free on \$5,000 bond.

If convicted, she could face a maximum of seven years in prison.

The Owensville City Council,
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in its bi-monthly meeting Monday night, voted in closed session to continue Ms. Hengstenberg's employment as city clerk "pending final resolution of the charges against her," the city said this morning in news release.

But the council also decided to relieve her of all financial duties and responsibilities.

Those duties have been reassigned to Bobbi Limberg, a utilities clerk who was named interim chief financial officer.

The city in February passed a resolution giving unanimous support for Ms. Hengstenberg in the face of possible charges being filed against her.

When asked if the city could later regret offering that support, Mayor Roxana Riefer said Monday afternoon: "Nothing has been proven yet and I still believe she's innocent until proven guilty.

"They did what they had to," she added. "We still believe in her, but if there are lumps to take on this, I guess we'll have no choice but to take them."

Without getting into specific evidence, Bill Tackett, a Cole County assistant prosecutor assigned as special prosecutor in the case,

said the amount of time it took the grand jury to issue its indictment should carry a certain amount of weight toward the evidence against her.

He said three independent auditing firms that have reviewed the city's funds over the last two years demonstrated the utmost professionalism.

The state auditor's 1994 report prompted an investigation by the Missouri Highway Patrol. But a second review conducted by an independent auditor found no evidence of missing funds from the city.

Based on that discrepancy, the city council offered its support of Ms. Hengstenberg in February. The city said that work overload and frequent turnover through a six-year period in Ms. Hengstenberg's position possibly led to poor record keeping and that she was not directly responsible.

Ms. Riefer said neither she nor any member of the city council was called to testify before the grand jury.

A grand jury's proceedings are closed to the public. Only if an indictment is issued does the case proceed in open court.