

NEWS

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
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Former Vehicles Services Manager Admits Taking Bribes
to Help Steer Truck-Sales Contracts to Neptune Township

(More)

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NEWARK – A former general manager of a vehicle services company that contracted with Neptune Township admitted today to taking \$6,500 in bribes from a truck sales company that sold equipment to the township, U.S. Attorney Christopher J. Christie announced.

Richard Messer, 45, of Oakhurst, admitted before U.S. District Judge William J. Martini that he took the bribes from International Trucks of Central Jersey (ITCJ) as a reward for securing the sale of ITCJ trucks to Neptune Township.

During his guilty plea, Messer identified two people previously indicted in the ongoing corruption probe in Monmouth County: Stephen Appolonia, one of the owners of ITCJ, and Robert Feldman, ITCJ's municipal salesman.

Messer pleaded guilty to one count of defrauding his employer of its right to honest services, which carries a maximum statutory penalty of 20 years in prison and a fine of \$250,000. Judge Martini scheduled sentencing for May 15. Messer is free on a \$100,000 unsecured bond.

Messer was the general manager of First Vehicle Services of Neptune, a fleet management and maintenance company. Messer said he was responsible for overseeing and supervising maintenance of all government vehicles for Neptune. Messer said he also assisted the Neptune Department of Public Works with obtaining specifications for new vehicles, accepting new vehicles and ensuring that the township received the vehicles and other equipment that it ordered.

Messer said that, in his time at First Vehicle Services, he had a close relationship with Feldman, the ITCJ municipal salesman. Messer told Judge Martini that, between about August 2001 and April 2002, he helped facilitate the sale of three commercial trucks, and that after that Feldman approached him and told him that one of the owners of ITCJ, Stephen Appolonia, wanted to reward him for helping secure those sales.

Messer admitted that he took a check for \$1,500 signed by Appolonia and made payable to Messer's landscaping company for landscaping that was never performed.

Messer said he subsequently helped facilitate the sale of another five commercial trucks from Feldman to the Neptune Department of Public Works. Messer said he was then directed by Feldman to create a false invoice – for \$5,000 – purporting to be from a family member's landscaping business even though no services were ever actually provided.

Messer said he then received two checks from ITCJ totaling \$5,000 in reward for helping secure the sale of the ITCJ trucks, and for his further influence in future sales.

Messer kept the \$6,500 from ITCJ for himself, neglecting to disclose this conflict of interest with his employer. Messer was employed by First Vehicle Services for almost six years.

Stephen Appolonia, his brother, Matthew and Feldman were indicted on charges related to the bribe payments to Messer as well as other charges in July 2006. Their trial is scheduled for March 12, 2006.

Christie credited Special Agents of the FBI's Red Bank Resident Agency, under the direction of Special Agent in Charge Leslie G. Wisner, Jr.; and detectives from Brick Police Department, under the direction of Police Chief Ron Dougard; and the Ocean County Prosecutor's Office, under the direction of Prosecutor Thomas Kelaher, with the investigation that resulted in today's guilty plea.

The case is being prosecuted by Assistant U.S. Attorneys Mark McCarren (Chief, Public Protection Unit) and Hope Olds, of the Special Prosecutions Division.

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Defense Counsel:

Donald McCauley, Esq., Assistant Federal Public Defender, Newark