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## **Money Laundering Investigation Nets Eight Defendants**

**TRENTON** -- Mercer County Prosecutor Joseph L. Bocchini, Jr. announced that an eight-month money laundering investigation concluded this week with eight defendants facing charges.

According to Bocchini, the charges stem from an eight month investigation conducted by the Mercer County Prosecutor's Economic Crime Unit (ECU). In July 2009, prosecutor's Detective Michele Russell was contacted by Detective Ed Cunningham of the Trenton Police Department regarding a bad check investigation. The owner of Gomez Check Cashing, located on South Broad Street, reported that approximately \$29,000 worth of checks had been returned as counterfeit. The investigation revealed that a total of 15 checks in amounts ranging from \$385 to \$6,000 were cashed between June 27, 2009 and July 10, 2009. The checks were from three accounts held at two different banks by the following companies: BNB Housing, LLC; Platinum Plus Construction; and A Plus Funding, LLC. Investigators determined that Platinum Plus Construction and A Plus Funding were shell companies created to advance the money laundering scheme.

Further investigation determined that an additional \$111,000 in checks was issued by the three entities. All of the checks were made out to Stephen Parisi, James Mucci or Par-Tek Mechanical purportedly for construction work that they had performed for the three companies. All of the checks were cashed at various banks and check cashing establishments for a grand total of \$140,000 over a three-week period in July 2009. Investigators determined that none of these checks were for actual construction work but were instead in furtherance of the money laundering scheme.

As part of the overall ploy, all of the checks were given to Stephen Parisi or James Mucci. These individuals cashed the checks at various banks and check cashing establishments, then returned to the BNB Housing office and turned the money over to Wayne Bessant, owner of BNB Housing. Bessant would pocket some of the cash or turn it over to an individual identified as Breone Christie. Bessant instructed Christie to either redeposit the cash into the bank or to go to one of the check cashing stores to pay off debt from some of the bounced checks. Another individual who worked at the office, identified as Darnell Bessant AKA Meats, was instructed by Bessant to verify that the checks were good when the banks or check cashing businesses called the BNB Housing office.

The deposits were structured so as to avoid the transaction reporting requirements of New Jersey and the U.S. Treasury Department. Both New Jersey and the federal government require that a Currency Transaction Report (CTR) be completed for all currency transactions of \$10,000 or more.

**Wayne Bessant**, 29, is charged with two counts of money laundering, one count of theft by deception and one count of issuing bad checks. He faces a potential sentence of up to 30 years in state prison.

Bessant has been incarcerated since his December 2009 arrest by the prosecutor's ECU for identity theft, attempted theft by deception, fraudulent use of credit cards and computer theft via accessing and disclosing data. He is currently under indictment for two counts of theft by unlawful taking resulting from an investigation conducted by the prosecutor's ECU during the fall of 2008 where he stole \$200,000 from Commerce Bank through fraudulent fund transfers. Bessant is also on federal supervised release for a 2001 drug conviction.

Mercer County Superior Court Judge Edward M. Neafsey set Bessant's bail at \$300,000 for this case. He is currently at the Mercer County Correction Center in Hopewell Township.

Also charged with two counts of money laundering and one count of theft by deception are:

- **Antoine Bethel** (DOB 7/6/69), currently in NJDOC Central Reception and Assignment Facility (CRAF)
- **Darnell Bessant** (DOB 9/2/66), also in CRAF
- **Stephen Parisi** (DOB 6/5/69), of Petunia Drive, Levittown, PA
- **Robert Prusik** (DOB 6/3/58), of Carnegie Avenue, Hamilton, NJ
- **Breone Christie** (DOB 3/12/87), of Chambers Street, Trenton, NJ
- **James Mucci** (DOB 11/26/47), of First Avenue, Croydon, PA
- **Daniel Peyton** (DOB 6/13/65), of Carteret Avenue, Trenton, NJ

An arrest warrant has been issued for **Erica James** (DOB 7/17/85), whose last known address is 371 Cummings Avenue in Trenton. James is charged with two counts of money laundering, one count of theft by deception and one count of issuing bad checks. Anyone having information regarding her whereabouts should call prosecutor's Detective Michele Russell at (609) 278-4865.

The investigation is ongoing. Bocchini credited the members of the Mercer County Prosecutor's Office Economic Crime Unit and the United States Secret Service with the investigation leading to the charges. He also thanked the Trenton Police Department and the New Jersey Department of Corrections for their assistance.

The case is being prosecuted by Assistant Prosecutor James Scott, chief of the prosecutor's ECU.

Despite having been charged, all persons are presumed innocent until found guilty beyond a reasonable doubt in a court of law.

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