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Sunday, April 23, 2006

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Hands in the till: Some town officials succumb to fraud

By COLIN HICKEY, Blethen Maine News Service

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At the town office in _____
 Madison, the numbers were _____ ADVERTISEMENT
 off by \$255,000, while in _____
 Manchester the discrepancy _____
 found in the town accounts came to \$212,000.

In the Madison case, former Town Clerk Lisa Paine pleaded guilty in 1997 to embezzling the money - dollars from the people in her community - from 1990 to 1996.

The Manchester case has yet to be resolved, although Patsy Rollins, the town's former tax collector, treasurer and town clerk, faces 31 charges of aggravated forgery.

These are two of the most blatant examples of financial irregularities in town offices in central Maine, but they are hardly the only ones.

Last summer, the former town clerk and treasurer in Industry pleaded guilty to stealing \$25,000 in public money. Earlier this month, a Franklin County grand jury indicted the former town clerk in New Sharon for allegedly stealing more than \$4,600 from the municipality.

Paine pleaded guilty to one count of theft by embezzlement, which is punishable by a maximum of 10 years in prison under Maine criminal statutes. The judge imposed an eight-year prison sentence, with all but 30 months suspended, and she will be on probation for four years.

In Industry, Cathy Frazier, 34, pleaded guilty to a reduced charge of theft by unauthorized taking, a misdemeanor, which took into

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consideration the fact the money was repaid. She was sentenced to 180 days, all suspended, with one year probation. She was also ordered to repay the town \$3,000 for an in-depth audit it had done to determine the exact amount of money stolen, according to Assistant Franklin County District Attorney Andrew Robinson.

An offense involving such a substantial amount of money normally would be a felony charge, but through negotiations with her attorney, Kevin Joyce, prosecutors agreed to reduce it to a misdemeanor. The charge carries a maximum sentence of 364 days in jail with a \$2,000 fine.

Ellen Grant, 58, of New Sharon, was indicted for felony theft for allegedly taking money from the town between 2002 and 2005. She was town clerk for 12 years until March 2005. Although the exact amount taken over the years in New Sharon is believed to be as much as \$25,000, most has been repaid to the town and in the end, about \$4,600 remains unaccounted for, prosecutors said.

Michael Starn of the Maine Municipal Association said such violations of the public trust, while uncommon, continue to occur; and each time they do, they cause pain and anger and call into the question the way in which local officials handle town finances.

Anybody who doubts that such incidents continue to happen needs only keep up on state news. Deborah Wyman, community development director in Norway, was arraigned Thursday in Oxford County Superior Court on a charge of stealing more than \$10,000 from the town. She pleaded not guilty.

A former sewer clerk in Livermore Falls, meanwhile, will be the chief topic Monday night at a Board of Selectmen meeting in Livermore Falls.

Faith Nichols has admitted taking \$102,000 from the town's sewer department, according to selectmen. Nichols has paid back \$20,000 as of December.

Time after time, temptation and a lack of check and balances are the chief factors in the misdeed, according to both Starn and State Auditor Neria R. Douglass.

"When you have motive and opportunity together, that is where the difficulty lies," Douglass said, "which is why it is always better to have two sets of eyes looking over everything."

The reality, however, is that in many towns, especially small ones, one person is responsible for almost all aspects of town finances.

Generally speaking, though, Starn said, municipalities are getting wiser to deception, which might explain why the issue has gained more public exposure in recent years.

"I think one reason we are hearing more about it is that our checking systems are getting better," Starn said, "so people who think they can get away with it are mistaken."