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watsonville

Woman pays back \$44K from embezzlement

By Julie Copeland

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A former employee of First American Title Co. in Watsonville walked into the Santa Cruz County Courthouse Tuesday and presented a check for \$44,000, payment for money she embezzled three years ago.

Sandra Hunter, 56, of Santa Maria was arrested in August 2004.

Hunter was an escrow officer at the title company in 2003. Between March 2003 and November 2003, Hunter wired money from escrow accounts 14 times into her personal account in the amount of \$40,000. The loss was discovered after an internal audit in early 2004.

Assistant District Attorney Paul Marigonda said Hunter had worked for the firm for eight years and was a trusted employee.

But when the audit turned up the fraud, Hunter was fired. In April 2005 she pleaded guilty to felony embezzlement. The late Judge Art Danner sentenced her to six months in jail if she agreed to pay back the entire amount plus 10 percent interest.

"She sold her house, a house her mother left her in Santa Barbara County," Marigonda said. "She had to evict the tenant. It took a long time, but she finally did it. And today she came into court with cashier's check."

Marigonda said he's pleased with the outcome.

"First American Title is very excited, as were we," he said.

Marigonda said Hunter took the money to make ends meet. And completing the circle of theft includes making sure restitution by the defendant is met.

"We really take restitution very, very seriously," Marigonda said. "It's important for the

victims to be made whole."

Hunter will do her time, about four months, in Santa Barbara County.

Her five-year probation term includes limiting her access to other people's money and requiring her to disclose her conviction to future employers.

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