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Local leader arrested in alleged embezzlement

By Anna Bakalis, abakalis@VenturaCountyStar.com

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A business leader has been arrested on suspicion of embezzling more than \$15,000 from the Moorpark Chamber of Commerce, police said Friday.

Colleen Durston, 53, of Moorpark was arrested Wednesday, Moorpark Police said. She was hired as a contractor to design the annual directory for the chamber and was also involved with selling ads.

Durston has been cooperative, and most of the money was recovered soon after it was discovered missing in June, said police Sgt. Will Hammer, the investigating officer.

Durston was booked into Ventura County Jail on suspicion of grand theft, police said.

In May and June, chamber officials noticed through normal checks and balances that money was missing and turned evidence over to the Moorpark Police, which has since been investigating the allegation.

Leaders of the business organization did not say how the money was allegedly stolen, but one official said it is a rule that all checks are to be made out to the chamber, not to an individual.

"We actually discovered this through our normal control processes. We verified through the contracts," said Lisa Masotti, office manager at the chamber.

Police said Durston admitted to the organization that she took money, and apologized and returned most of it.

In an e-mail sent in July, the chamber told its members about an embezzlement incident without naming a suspect. It read in part: "The Moorpark Chamber of Commerce prides itself in the promotion of the highest ethical standards for our business, our members and our community."

On Wednesday, after enough evidence was compiled, police called Durston and told her that she had to come to the police station.

"She was cooperative. She came right down when we asked her," Hammer said.

Durston, an almost 20-year resident of Moorpark, did not return phone calls seeking comment Friday.

She is known in the community as a leader of local events and charities. She was named the chamber's ambassador of the year twice and belongs to the Kiwanis Club of Moorpark, the Women's Information Networking and the High Street Theater Foundation.

"It's such a small town, everyone knows everyone else," Masotti said. "Everyone's in the same clubs and organizations."

Masotti said since the alleged incident, the chamber has had no contact with Durston, who had been hired to do the directory the previous year. An independent graphic artist, Durston owns CDG Marketing and Design.

She was released from Ventura County Jail on \$10,000 bail. A hearing is set in Ventura County Superior Court on Wednesday.

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