



Story available at <http://www.billingsgazette.net/articles/2007/04/15/news/state/40-guilty.txt>

Published on Sunday, April 15, 2007.
Last modified on 4/15/2007 at 12:20 am

Ex-school official guilty of embezzling

By The Associated Press

MISSOULA - The former St. Regis school clerk has pleaded guilty to stealing more than a half-million dollars from local schools.

Julie Downing entered the pleas to three counts of embezzlement in District Court recently. Her sentencing is scheduled June 13.

Prosecutors say Downing stole \$514,000 from the school district over a seven-year period.

Mineral County officials believe Downing took most of the money by using school district checks to repay charges she made to both district credit cards and credit cards in her name.

Documents show Downing charged vacations, tickets to a Rolling Stones concert and season tickets to University of Montana football games.

Restitution required

A plea agreement proposes a 30-year prison sentence, with all but five years suspended. Downing also would have to pay restitution.

Besides the \$514,000 she admitted to stealing, Downing would also be responsible for \$72,000 paid to accountants to investigate the bookkeeping discrepancies discovered by school superintendent Becky Aaring last August.

Legal fees would put Downing's overall bill close to \$600,000.

Will have to sell home

Mineral County Attorney Shaun Donovan said Downing will be required to sell her home, an acre of property and possibly a new home she and her boyfriend are building on land her father owns.

"We all agree - we being the attorney advising her, I think Julie and her family, the school district and me - that we want this stuff sold and we want it sold in a way that gets the most value for it," Donovan said. "We're willing to exercise some patience in the long run if it'll be better for the school district."

Downing would still owe \$400,000 after divesting the property.

"That's one of the reasons to put her back on the street at some point and make her work for it," Donovan said. "She apparently has some hopes that she can maybe get loans or family help or something like that to defray this more quickly. But nobody else has that obligation."

He said Downing's crime dwarfed any theft he's prosecuted in 27 years as county attorney.

Copyright © 2007 Associated Press. All rights reserved. This material may not be published, broadcast, rewritten, or redistributed.

Copyright © The Billings Gazette, a division of [Lee Enterprises](#).