

Ferrellgas suit alleges former employee ‘pocketed’ millions

Scott Beeson, a Platte City area resident and founder of the Prominent Youth organization, has been implicated in an intricate fraud scheme targeting his former employer.

According to court documents filed in Platte County Circuit Court, Ferrellgas, Inc. alleges in a civil action that Beeson worked with several accomplices in embezzling \$3.5 million from the company, and at least \$3 million was pocketed by Beeson.

“Through an internal investigation, we discovered that a significant amount of money had been stolen from us over a period of years,” Ferrellgas spokesperson Scott Brockelmeyer said. “We are taking aggressive action to protect our financial interests.”

As first reported in *The Citizen’s* April 2 print version and at its Web site, plattecountycitizen.com, also on April 2, Ferrellgas asked for and received a Court-issued restraining order last week that freezes all of Beeson’s assets, including bank accounts and property. The order was issued against Beeson and his wife, Cheryl Beeson.

The restraining order was set to expire Monday, with the issuance of a preliminary injunction expected, but Beeson’s attorney, Scott Campbell, of Platte City, and Ferrellgas attorneys Rick Frawley and Matt Lytle, of the Bryan Cave Law Firm of Kansas City, agreed to a 10-day extension of the restraining order. The extension was granted by Platte County Judge Dan Czamanske. Beeson’s next hearing was set for 11 a.m. April 16.

An amended petition filed Monday — an expanded version of a petition originally filed March 28 — alleges that Beeson, as Ferrellgas fleet manager, created, organized, implemented and orchestrated a systematic scheme involving fraudulent and false vendor invoices. According to the allegations, Beeson instructed the vendors, identified as Nationwide Equipment, LLC, Nationwide Refurbishing Center, LLC, Nationwide, LLC, Ideal Solution, LLC, and Helgers Trucking and Sales, how and when to submit the false invoices to Ferrellgas for payment. The invoices listed work that had not been performed and/or contained excessive fees and expenses. The petition goes on to say that Beeson then instructed the vendors where to send or wire the money received from Ferrellgas for payment of the false invoices.

The court documents allege that Beeson either deposited the money in his own personal bank accounts or channeled it to “a non-profit business entity of which he was the founder, chief executive officer and a member of the board of directors.” That organization is believed to be Prominent Youth, though it is not stated by name in any of the filed documents.

All of the afore-mentioned companies are named in the amended law suit, as are the following individuals associated with the vendors: Nationwide officials Stacey Williams and Tracy Lavigne, Kansas City; Ideal Solutions owner Karl Snyder, Kansas City; and James, Connie and Steve Helgers, Mellott, Ind., owners of Helgers Trucking and Sales.

Other court documents filed include an affidavit from a Ferrellgas employee involved in an internal audit that the company says revealed the fraud.

Brockelmeyer said Ferrellgas has turned over all of the findings of its internal audit to the Federal Bureau of Investigation.

“Whether or not any criminal charges are filed rests entirely with the FBI,” he said.

The FBI’s Kansas City office said it could neither confirm nor deny it was conducting an investigation. Beeson began working for Ferrellgas in August 1995. He was terminated from his position as fleet manager on March 13. Ferrellgas, a nationwide marketer of propane gas, is headquartered in Overland Park, Kan. and has offices in Platte City, Kearney, Kansas City, Mo. and Kansas City, Kan.

Also reported in the April 2 print version of *The Citizen* was the dissolution of Prominent Youth, a non-profit organization founded by Beeson in 2005. Prominent Youth was formed to provide educational, business and athletic opportunities to scores of students in area school districts, including Platte County and Park Hill. The organization was funded by private donations and foundations.

Due to the allegations against Beeson, who was the organization's major benefactor, a former vice president of operations said last week that 10 management officials and Board members had resigned. The former official also said that funding for all programs and activities had been halted indefinitely.

Cemetery suit headed for federal court

While the battle to save several family cemeteries on property slated for development at Kansas City International Airport (KCI) has been in the local media for the last year, the story may soon go national with a move to federal court.

Late last month, an action was filed in the US District Court of Western Missouri asking for expedited action approving the identification and possible relocation of several cemeteries which lie in the path of development.

Olin Miller, a familiar local figure who has been involved with this issue from the start, has a vested interest in the case, as a descendent of those interred in the KCI area. He is sextant of the more than 120-year-old Miller-Rixey cemetery.

"Progress may be necessary, and desirable, but history need not be destroyed by it," Miller said. "To assure the speediest discovery and removal of all the affected graveyards and unknown graves, if that is what is necessary, this court action is a positive step."

The federal lawsuit preceded a motion to stay a state court action in Platte County, presided over by Judge Abe Shafer. In that case, the City of Kansas City was unable to demonstrate it owned two of the cemeteries it asked permission of the Court to relocate.

Another descendent of those buried in the area has also joined the cause, asking for consideration for African-American slaves buried in both marked and unmarked graves. Last spring, Miller, historian Shirley Kimsey and other concerned citizens believe they located a slave cemetery possibly containing 80 graves.

"How shall we bring to these slaves and indentured servants fulfillment of the promise made to them when they were granted citizenship under the United States Constitution?" said descendent Oralea Watkins. "Isn't this a great opportunity for all of us to work together to prove America is without exception the land of the free?"

Watkins is the daughter of Warren Watkins, who said that according to the United States Census, Platte County was home to 300 slaves in 1830 and 4,000 in 1860.

"Not everyone fled on the Underground Railroad to Kansas," he said. "Most were buried here in Platte County."

And while the area holds obvious significance for the descendents of those buried there, it also holds national significance, according to archeologist Dr. Mark Raab.

"Platte County history, once ignored, has come to be regarded as one of the most significant of the pre- and post-Civil War era," Raab said. "The 'border wars' may have been the first skirmishes and then battles of what became the War Between the States. These grounds were settled long before Europeans arrived, by Native Americans. Prairie, farms and plantations hold keys to the story of how our Missouri River basin

evolved to what it is today. The area is covered with treasures which do not have to prevent or even slow down development — indeed — history and development can enhance each other.”

Platte County falls within the areas already recognized in the Freedom’s Frontier National Heritage Area Act, which was signed into law in 2006 by President George W. Bush. In this program, 37 regions across the nation are recognized, including eastern Kansas and western Missouri, for distinctive history, culture and landscape that tell the story of the quest for national and individual freedom.

Miller has suggested the City of Kansas City set aside five acres near the existing Miller-Rixey cemetery for the proper relocation of burial grounds, and maintain the area as parkland.

As two of the cemeteries in question are in the vicinity of the proposed Bombardier Aerospace assembly plant, it does behoove the City to resolve the relocation and ownership issues.

Senate Bill 1234, sponsored by Sen. Charlie Shields, is currently moving through the Missouri Senate, and is the first step in bringing the Bombardier plant to KCI. The bill would allow the Missouri Department of Economic Development to offer state assistance to Canada-based Bombardier to build a \$375 million passenger jet assembly plant.

Despite late opposition, R-3 bond issue passes easily

Many Platte County R-3 School District patrons arrived home on Monday evening and discovered a postcard in their mailboxes urging them to vote against the R-3 bond issue on Tuesday. Apparently, most of those patrons paid little attention to the direct mail piece, sent by a committee called Platte Countians for Tax Relief.

More than 68 percent of the 2,318 R-3 patrons in Platte County who cast ballots voted for the \$7.95 million bond issue, which will fund new elementary classrooms at Paxton School, renovations at the current Barry School, a new vocal music room at Platte County High School and various other improvements, including parking lot and playground projects. The final unofficial vote in Platte County was 1,560 for and 717 against.

“We are very appreciative of the continued support we receive from the community,” R-3 Superintendent Dr. Mark Harpst said. “We look forward to another project that will benefit our students and patrons for many years to come.”

Harpst declined to comment on the opposition direct mailer.