

NEWS RELEASE

Luther Strange

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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FORMER ESCAMBIA WORTHLESS CHECK COORDINATOR PLEADS GUILTY TO ETHICS VIOLATION AND FORGERY

(MONTGOMERY) – Just before her trial was set to begin this week, the former worthless check coordinator for the Escambia County District Attorney’s Office pleaded guilty to a felony ethics charge and second-degree forgery. A probation and sentencing hearing for Monica Lynn Watson is scheduled for May 8. Attorney General Luther Strange today announced developments in the case, which was prosecuted by the Attorney General’s Public Corruption and White Collar Crime Division.

Trial was set to begin on Monday, April 16, but beforehand Watson pleaded guilty to the intentional misuse of her public position for illegal personal gain through the mishandling of funds in the worthless check unit, and to second-degree forgery of a motion that purported to be signed by the District Attorney for the dismissal of a case against a defendant.

“This case involves extensive documentation from the Examiners of Public Accounts of misuse of funds totaling \$10, 259,” said Attorney General Strange. “It is important that this defendant has been held to account and will be punished for her crimes to betray the public trust and abuse government funds.”

Charges against Watson arose from information in an audit of the Escambia County District Attorney’s Office conducted in 2008 by the Examiners of Public Accounts, covering the period of September 1, 2006, to May 31, 2008. Discrepancies in funds of the Worthless Check Unit (WCU) led to further inquiries, which uncovered money orders that had been received by the District Attorney’s Office but not receipted in the WCU. It was discovered that two money orders had been deposited into Watson’s credit union account. Furthermore, there was no record in WCU records for certain people who had paid cash to and had handwritten receipts from Watson, but the receipts were logged in under someone else’s name. The Examiners’ audit also cites Watson for filing motions to dismiss cases saying that those defendants had paid all money they owed when they had not, and that the motions were stamped with the District Attorney’s name. According to the audit, \$10, 259 was stolen from the WCU, which Watson initially refused but later repaid.

Watson entered a “blind” plea on Monday, which means there is no agreement for prosecutors to recommend a particular sentence or for any reduced penalty. She faces a potential penalty of two to 20 years imprisonment for the ethics violation, which is a class B felony, and one to 10 years for second-degree forgery, a class C felony.

Attorney General Strange commended those who handled this case, noting in particular Assistant Attorneys General Bill Lisenby and Stephanie Billingslea and Paralegal Lori Arnold of his Public Corruption and White Collar Crime Division, and Special Agents of the Attorney General’s Investigations Division. He thanked the Examiners of Public Accounts and the Escambia County District Attorney’s Office for valuable assistance.

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