

The Columbus Dispatch

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THEFT, EXTORTION

Towing operator charged in scam

Tuesday, October 23, 2007 3:42 AM

BY THEODORE DECKER

THE COLUMBUS DISPATCH

Danny W. Birt

A Virginia trucker left his semi parked beside a home-improvement store on the North Side. The next day it was gone, impounded by a towing company whose claim to the stretch of service road was stated on a sign obscured by weeds, police say.

An 85-year-old South Side woman's car was spirited away from behind her house on Oct. 28, 2006.

Another woman's car was towed from the parking lot of a Short North discount store. She paid the bill to retrieve her car and likely thought the incident was over -- until a Columbus police detective contacted her early this year.

Police say these people and more than 20 others are among the victims of a Gahanna man who ran a towing scheme that amounted to theft and extortion.

A grand jury has indicted Danny W. Birt, 41, of 1065 Venetian Way, on 27 felony counts each of grand theft-auto and extortion after a yearlong investigation by Columbus police, detectives say. He is free on a recognizance bond while the case, slated for trial in November, proceeds.

Messages left at his company, On-Demand Towing, and the office of Birt's attorney were not returned yesterday.

Franklin County Prosecutor Ron O'Brien said police began to investigate Birt after complaints from vehicle and business owners across Columbus. The indictment alleges the crimes occurred between May 2006 and this March.

Police said they began investigating a year ago, amassing a list of victims -- both individuals and businesses -- who hadn't given Birt's company permission to tow vehicles from their property.

Detectives said On-Demand Towing would send letters to property owners, advising them that the company would tow illegally parked vehicles for them at no cost. The letters said there was no need to respond.

Further investigation revealed that On-Demand Towing even posted signs in some areas, warning of the towing policy and advising people where and how to recover their vehicles.

"Tows were being done without the consent of the property owner," O'Brien said.

The extortion charges allege that Birt was "holding (each) vehicle hostage" when he had no right to seize it in the first place, the prosecutor said.

"The extortion fits in with making the demand for funds to which you're not entitled," he said.

Authorities said Birt would tow the vehicles to his own lot, then charge owners to get them back. In some cases, towing and recovery fees topped \$2,000, O'Brien said.

The lead detective on the case, Jimmie Spragg of the auto-theft squad, could not be reached for comment yesterday, but O'Brien said police did a "very outstanding job" bringing the complicated case to the point of indictment.

There have been other cases of rogue tow-truck drivers through the years, but O'Brien said Birt's operation was more involved than most.

"It generally hasn't risen to the felony level," he said.

Dispatch reporter Bruce Cadwallader contributed to this story.

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