

FDLE agent pleads no contest in homestead case

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A top state law enforcement officer based in the Florida Keys who was accused of violating homestead exemption laws pleaded no contest Monday to a misdemeanor theft charge in a plea agreement that will leave him with no criminal record.

Circuit Judge Mark Jones withheld adjudication of guilt on the theft charge, and a charge of providing false homestead information was dismissed as part of the plea agreement between Vince Weiner and prosecutors.

Weiner is a Florida Department of Law Enforcement (FDLE) special agent in charge who oversaw Monroe County operations.

To withhold adjudication means the court does not pass judgment on a case, and thus the defendant has no criminal conviction on his or her record.

Weiner was ordered to pay \$338 in court, investigative and prosecution costs. He previously had paid the property tax that had been exempted, interest and penalties totalling \$11,655, according to Monroe County tax collector records.

Weiner was accused of illegally claiming a homestead exemption on his Big Pine Key home, and renting out the house while he was working in Fort Myers from 2006 to 2010, according to an FDLE investigation, an arrest warrant and statements made in court by Assistant State Attorney Mark Wilson.

The Monroe County property appraiser's website shows Weiner has claimed a \$25,000 homestead exemption for his Big Pine Key house since 2003.

"Although I never intended to violate the homestead exemption law, no one can ever truly gauge what a jury will decipher and decide after testimony and evidence is presented," Weiner said in a prepared statement. "The risk was all mine. I believed it was in my best interest personally, professionally and financially to accept the State Attorney's Office offer. I look forward to putting this behind me and moving on with my life, as I have in the past, in a positive and productive manner."

Wilson said the plea deal was an appropriate outcome.

"Given the circumstances, we think it's a fair resolution to the case," he said.

Jones told Weiner he made the right choice in resolving the matter Monday, but told Weiner he didn't believe that it was something that Weiner "missed."

"You're held to a higher standard here as a state law enforcement officer," Jones said. "You've got to be squeaky clean. It is imperative for people's confidence in the criminal justice system. If people think we operate by a different standard, it undermines public confidence in the system."

Defense attorney Don Barrett said his client wished to put the matter behind him. Weiner has worked in law enforcement for more than 20 years, most of those with the FDLE.

"The issue of his employment with FDLE remains to be determined," Barrett said. "We anticipate that he will be able to retain his law enforcement officer certification, but whether or not he stays with the FDLE remains to be seen."

The FDLE began investigating Weiner in April 2010 after receiving a complaint that he lied to the Monroe County Property Appraiser's Office during two previous investigations into whether he had rented his Big Pine Key home while living outside Monroe County.

Weiner was reassigned from the Key West field office to the Fort Myers Regional Operations Center in July 2006. He worked in Fort Myers until he was reassigned to the Marathon field office in May 2010.

Weiner lived at three residences -- two in Cape Coral and a third in Punta Gorda -- between July 2006 and May 2010, and not at his Big Pine Key house, according to the arrest warrant.

He was hired by the FDLE in 1993.

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