

Police investigating towing incident

Authorities execute warrant at Shanks; seize towed vehicles

JAMES SCOTT BARON
The Free Lance-Star

The Stafford County Sheriff's Office executed search warrants at a local towing company that removed eight vehicles from a

neighborhood in North Stafford.

Shanks Towing was approached by law enforcement Wednesday after residents of the town house community said the towing company illegally removed their cars off private property in November.

"We presented our case and our evidence to the magistrate," said Stafford County Sheriff's Cpt. Lee Peters. "Probable cause was found to issue two search warrants."

Peters said he consulted with Commonwealth's Attorney Eric Olsen on the circumstances of the case.

"We've got their guidance and they are assisting in the appropriate ways in this investigation," Peters said.

The search warrants were executed simultaneously at noon at Shanks' facilities at 500 Musselman Road in Falmouth and at 3616

Summit Crossing Road in Spotylvania County. Chris Shanks arrived at the Falmouth location with another man shortly after noon and allowed nearly a dozen deputies access to his small office building, as well as the gated yard where vehicles are stored.

The investigation into Shanks and his company comes after residents of Austin Run Boulevard and Austin Court in North Stafford say

Shanks towed vehicles from parking spaces for no reason Nov. 28.

"Our HOA has been defunct for 20 years," said Mike Hammond, who lives in the 100 block of Austin Run Boulevard. "And now they're just showing up out of nowhere towing our vehicles?"

Peters said a look at the towing contract reveals Shanks'

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authorization to tow the vehicles came from a contract Shanks entered with River Potomac, a King George County company managed by Joseph Scott Cleveland, a real estate agent with the Re/Max Supercenter. Peters said the towing contract shows River Potomac asked Shanks to enforce HOA rules solely for 111 Austin Court, a town house in the process of being sold for \$309,900 according to the Re/Max website. Residents nearby say the town house was recently refurbished, and the listing includes a \$70 monthly HOA fee in a neighborhood where no HOA exists.

“As our investigation continues, we will continue to see if there are any other associated crimes along with this,” Peters said. “We will dig into it and follow the evidence to whoever or wherever it goes.”

Calls to Cleveland last week seeking more information on his company’s towing contract with Shanks were not returned. Shanks also declined to speak with The Free Lance-Star last week after attempts to reach him by phone.

Hammond said on Nov. 4, employees of Shanks came onto his street as well as nearby Austin Court and placed signs warning residents they must comply with the “Covenants of Austin Run.”



JAMES SCOTT BARON PHOTOS, THE FREE LANCE-STAR

On Wednesday at Shanks Towing in Falmouth, Cpt. Lee Peters (center) and other Stafford County deputies prepare to retrieve vehicles towed by the company in late November from a North Stafford town house community.

Hammond said when the signs were placed, he reached out to Shanks to explain there was no HOA in his neighborhood to enforce, and there hasn’t been one there for 17 years.

On Nov. 25, residents say Shanks employees returned to the neighborhood to place notices on vehicles citing “documents duly recorded in the (Stafford) Clerk’s office” dating back to 1973 and 1980 as the company’s basis to launch a towing campaign. The notice also “requires” residents “maintain the premises and the improvements in a satisfactory manner.”

Last week, some longtime residents of the neighborhood had a hunch the sudden presence of tow trucks

in their ordinarily quiet neighborhood might have something to do with 111 Austin Court going on the market.

“They’re just trying to get a better price for that home up there,” said Tammy Trogdon of Austin Court.

On Nov. 28, residents say Shanks tow trucks converged on the neighborhood and hauled away eight vehicles.

“They literally dragged a car down the road,” Joanne Fearnow of Austin Court said. “The wheels weren’t even turning, they were just dragging it.”

Fearnow said she called Shanks that night and a dispatcher eventually told her to call James Hilldrup, a local lawyer.

“The next day, I called Hilldrup’s office and spoke to his secretary and they wouldn’t put me through to him,” Fearnow said.

The Free Lance-Star’s attempts to reach Hilldrup last week were also unsuccessful.

Stafford deputies on Wednesday seized all documents, photos and communications from Shanks related to last month’s towing incident. Peters also said deputies seized the vehicles Shanks towed out of the town house community as evidence.

“We will go where the evidence leads us,” Peters said. “Right now it’s about the improper removal of vehicles from private property.”



Mike Hammond, a resident of Austin Run Boulevard, tells county supervisors Tuesday that several of his neighbors were victims of ‘predatory towing’ on Nov. 28.

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