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Crooked police chief still gets a pension

And his Melrose Park deputy collected nearly \$400,000 despite conviction

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BY [STEVE WARBIR](#) Staff Reporter

Vito Scavo -- the crooked former Melrose Park police chief -- muscled a Catholic church, a movie theater, a children's amusement park and other businesses in the west suburb to hire his private security firm, which he staffed with on-duty cops.

He also ordered his employees -- while on the clock -- to drive his car from Illinois to his Florida vacation home.

He had them hang his Christmas lights, get his wife's car washed, take his dog to the groomer - and pick up its doo-doo from his backyard.

Scavo, who retired in 2006, was convicted of racketeering and extortion and sentenced in February to six years in prison.

But he's still getting his Melrose Park government pension -- \$7,737.88 a month.

Scavo's deputy police chief, James Caputo, had his own problems with the law. First, he was charged in state court with stealing \$36,000 in checks issued to the police department and eventually pleaded guilty. Then, he was charged in federal court along with Scavo. He pleaded guilty in that case, too, and got 31 months in prison.

All the while, he collected nearly \$400,000 in pension benefits, until the Village of Melrose Park Police Pension Fund Board stopped his payments earlier this month.

Illinois law provides for government pensions to be forfeited when public officials are convicted of felonies tied to their official duties. But, as Scavo and Caputo show, crooked officials can be charged, convicted and sentenced -- but still collect a substantial amount of their pensions.

That Scavo and Caputo have been able to collect on their pensions infuriates Michael Manzo, who ran unsuccessfully for Melrose Park village president in 2001, promising to replace Scavo if elected.

"It's a disgrace to all the honest cops who are putting into the pension that Vito Scavo is still getting paid," says Manzo.

Scavo continues to collect his pension because, even though he was sentenced earlier this year, the judgment against him hasn't formally been entered into the court record yet. That's when the proper authorities -- in this case, the Melrose Park Police Pension Fund Board -- can act to stop his pension payments, under state law. But no sooner.

Reached Friday, Scavo had no comment.

The final judgment in his case hasn't been entered because federal prosecutors and Scavo's attorneys are still squabbling over money -- exactly how much of his ill-gotten gains Scavo must forfeit. Prosecutors are asking for more than \$1 million. Scavo's lawyers say a more reasonable figure would be slightly more than \$600,000.

A judge could rule by early May.

By then, Scavo will have collected more than \$23,000 in pension benefits since he has been sentenced -- money that he will not have to give back.

As for Scavo's former deputy chief, Caputo was charged in July 2004 with stealing \$36,000 in police department money by cashing checks made out to the department by an alarm company to cover its fees.

He retired the following month -- and began collecting his pension.

In February 2005, Caputo was allowed to plead guilty to a misdemeanor, rather than a felony, sentenced to 90 days in jail and ordered to pay back the money, which he did. The Cook County state's attorney's office had no comment -- except to note that this all happened under another administration. The misdemeanor plea was crucial for Caputo. It takes a felony conviction to keep a government official from collecting a pension.

But then, in July 2007, Caputo was charged with Scavo and five others in the federal criminal case. Last June, Caputo pleaded guilty to felony mail fraud. In January, a judge sentenced him

to 31 months in prison.

His judgment was entered into the court record in February, which allowed the Melrose Park Police Pension Board to stop his pension. It did so earlier this month.

Asked about the pension, Caputo's attorney, Marc Martin, questioned the newsworthiness of the issue.

"For [a reporter] to travel out to Melrose Park at 5 p.m. on a Wednesday night for a pension hearing, it must have been a slow news day," Martin said.

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