

Former village worker facing 10 years for fuel theft

By JOSH STILTS / Reformer Staff

Posted: 02/01/2012 03:00:00 AM EST

Wednesday February 1, 2012

BRATTLEBORO -- A former Bellows Falls town employee is facing up to 10 years in prison after he allegedly stole 489.2 gallons of diesel fuel last year.

Michael C. Wheeler, 51, of Springfield, who worked as a laborer for the highway department, pleaded not guilty to felony embezzlement on Tuesday.

Wheeler said he had been on medical leave for a knee injury since October 2011, and that he asked a family member to fill up gas cans and bring them to him because he needed the fuel to heat his home, according to the affidavit.

Investigation of the stolen gasoline began after an employee of Cota and Cota fuel company, the current fuel vendor for the village of Bellows Falls, had witnessed "suspicious activity" at their fuel dispensing pumps, the affidavit states.

The employee stated that someone with the last name Wheeler said he was filling gas cans with diesel fuel for a relative and that he was using a gas key from a village employee, who was later identified as Michael Wheeler.

Village Manager Tim Cullenen told police that his office ran an audit of the gas key and learned it and another key from the Bellows Falls Highway Garage were missing.

From Nov. 6 to Dec. 30, 389.5 gallons were dispensed using one of the keys and charged to the town of Rockingham and the Village of Bellows Falls. Similarly, from Dec. 24 to Dec. 29, 99.7 gallons were charged. The total value of the fuel was estimated at \$1,558.29.

Cullenen

— stated that no employee has permission to use the Cota and Cota gas keys to obtain gasoline for personal use.

One of Wheeler's relatives told Bellows Falls Detective Sergeant Shane Harris, that he had been filling up five-gallon cans of diesel fuel from Cota and Cota and delivering them to Wheeler's residence in Springfield to be used for heating.

The relative stated that since Wheeler had a fuel account with Cota and Cota that he assumed the keys belonged to Wheeler.

"After initially denying the possession or use of the fuel keys, (Wheeler) admitted to taking both keys from the Bellows Falls Highway Garage in October of 2011," Harris wrote.

Wheeler told police that he didn't start using the key cards until November, when he needed heating fuel for his home, the affidavit states.

If convicted, Wheeler faces up to a decade behind bars as well as up to a \$1,000 fine.

Josh Stilts can be reached at jstilts@reformer.com, or 802-254-2311 ext. 273.