



Readington, Hunterdon, state split the seized \$100,000 which smelled of marijuana

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Lillian Shupe/Hunterdon County Democrat



Readington Twp. police

READINGTON TWP. — Although a search of a vehicle that yielded a backpack full of cash that smelled like marijuana was ruled invalid, the money was never returned to the vehicle’s occupants.

In June the appellate division of the state Superior Court ruled the search was invalid but many readers — including John Paff, who is chairman of the New Jersey Libertarian Party’s Open Government Advocacy Project — were curious as to what happened to the smelly money.

It was divided between the agencies involved in the case. The Hunterdon County Prosecutor’s Office got \$25,197.60, the Readington Police Department \$37,796.40 and the state kept the remaining \$41,906.

Ricardo Webb and Brian Bennett of Georgia were arrested on May 5, 2005. According to police, at 2:26 a.m. a motorist called to tell them that a white Chevy Yukon with New York plates had been driving erratically on Route 202 before turning onto Old York Road near the Branchburg/Readington township line.

Patrolman Joe Greco spotted the SUV turning onto Pleasant Run Road and pulled it over after having to go 60 mph in a 25 mph zone. Greco reported that he searched the vehicle after smelling a “strong odor of raw marijuana” and found a black backpack with more than \$100,000 stuffed inside.

Webb, who was also charged with careless driving, and Bennett, both denied owning the backpack.

A K-9 unit from the Somerset County Sheriff’s Office sniffed the Yukon for drugs. According to police, the drug dog “hit” on the bag of money, but no drugs were found. Webb’s defense attorney filed a motion to suppress the evidence because it was found without a warrant. The motion was granted, but the prosecutor appealed.

The appellate judges on June 17 affirmed the lower court’s decision. According to a spokesman for the Attorney General’s Office, the matter is under consideration for a possible appeal to the state Supreme Court.

As for the money, the attorney general filed a suit in Superior Court in Flemington seeking forfeiture shortly after Webb and Bennett were indicted on two counts of second-degree money laundering and conspiracy.

According to court documents obtained by Paff, the two men did not contest the forfeiture so the court granted the petition.

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