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Former cop among 2 scheduled for trial in prostitution case

By **Elizabeth Dinan**
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August 11, 2011 1:03 PM

PORTSMOUTH — Two men, one a former police officer, are scheduled for trial on charges alleging they solicited sex for cash during an undercover police sting.

Former Amesbury, Mass. police officer Mark A. Valli, 51, of 3 Birch Street, Newburyport, Mass., is fighting a charge alleging he paid a police informant \$100 for sex. He was arrested April 9 on a class B misdemeanor count of soliciting prostitution which is alleged to have occurred at a traffic circle hotel.

Valli has hired Portsmouth attorney and school committee member Carol Chellman to represent him during a trial scheduled for Sept. 20 in the District Court. The trial is expected to be presided over by Judge Stephen Morrison because, according to court records, Judge Sawako Gardner has an unspecified conflict of interest.

Chellman filed a plea of not guilty on Valli's behalf as well as requests for disclosure of all evidence against her client. Her request for evidence includes all information about witnesses against Valli, including juvenile records, criminal histories and any plea agreements.

Amesbury, Mass. Police Chief Mark Gagnon previously told the Herald that Valli worked as an Amesbury police officer until resigning in November of 2004 while citing personal reasons.

Also scheduled for trial as a result of the same prostitution sting is Jacob Steller, 33, of 340 Crown Point Drive, Strafford. He's charged with a misdemeanor alleging he was in possession of marijuana which he offered the police informant for sex.

According to court records, Steller is being represented by the Manchester law firm of Howard and Ruoff and is scheduled for a Sept. 6 trial.

A third man arrested during the same sting pleaded guilty and was sentenced in June. John Thibault, 47, of 11 Berry Lane, Greenland, pleaded guilty to answering an online ad for a prostitute working in Portsmouth, who was actually working with police. After he went into a city hotel room with the woman, Thibault locked and dead-bolted the door from the inside and detectives broke the door down to make the arrest, said Capt. Corey MacDonald.

For the prostitution conviction, Thibault was given a \$1,240 fine, with \$620 suspended. The suspended portion is contingent on his good behavior for one year and can be imposed if he's rearrested.

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