

Local woman stole from school councils because 'spending made her feel good'

STEPHANIE HOUNSELL
Special to The IFP

A depressed Halton Hills woman stole more than \$20,000 from three north Halton school councils because spending made her feel good.

That was among the information read to the court by Crown attorney Charon Kerr Wednesday just after Brenda Pickering, 43, pleaded guilty to three counts of theft over \$5,000.

Two counts of uttering forged documents were withdrawn.

"She said (speaking to a police officer) she had experienced depression and she felt good when she was spending money," Kerr told Justice Allan Cooper at Ontario Court of Justice in Burlington.

She used the funds to pay off credit cards and property taxes, the court heard.

Defence lawyer Stephen Darroch told the court those facts were correct.

Pickering—who has no previous criminal record—served as the volunteer treasurer for the school councils at J.M. Denyes and W.I. Dick as well as at Georgetown's Stewarttown Public School between 2002 and 2005.

A police investigation was initiated after a complaint by the Halton District School Board that irregularities had been discovered in the school councils' accounting practices.

Pickering was charged in February of last year.

Kerr told the court that, as treasurer for the school councils, Pickering was largely responsible for money collected from fundraisers.

Pickering was treasurer of the school council at J.M. Denyes from 2003 -2004, the court heard.

Suspensions were raised when a year-end report was provided months late after Pickering was repeatedly pressed for the document. When it was produced, the document indicated the council had \$21,000 in its account, but bank records revealed there was only \$158, Kerr said.

Auditing revealed Pickering had been writing cheques to herself and her husband from the account, the court heard.

Between 2002 and 2004, Pickering was also treasurer of the school council at W.I. Dick. Once again, she wrote cheques to herself and her husband, causing a shortfall that was discovered.

Pickering became council treasurer at Stewarttown in 2004 after her time ended at J.M. Denyes; she obtained money through similar methods there, Kerr said.

At one point, Pickering tried to repay stolen funds from one school to another, Kerr said.

In the end, the final amounts agreed upon that Pickering stole from the schools were about \$10,000 from J.M. Denyes, \$5,500 from W.I. Dick and almost \$9,000 from Stewarttown, Kerr said, which resulted in a restitution order of about \$24,000 to the Halton District School Board.

Pickering has already come up with \$11,500 and is supposed to pay the remainder early next year, Kerr said.

A sentencing date, likely in March 2008, will be set January 11 in Burlington court.



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