

Suarez arrested on new charge

SUBHED: Public works superintendent accused of filching quarters from parking meters

BY SCOTT FUSARO

KEY WEST — The city's superintendent of public works has been arrested on a charge of grand larceny, after he allegedly pocketed more than \$2,000 in change from city parking meters.

The arrest came after detectives reportedly watched Gilbert Suarez empty the money from downtown meters early Sunday morning, a practice they believe has gone on for years and which may have resulted in Suarez stealing tens or even hundreds of thousands of dollars in coins.

"We've been able to take a corrupt city employee and remove him from his illegal enterprise, and hopefully save the city taxpayers money," Key West Police Detective Sgt. Donie Lee said Friday.

A person who answered the phone at Suarez's home Friday said Suarez was not home before hanging up.

The city generated just over \$1 million in parking meter revenues in the most recent fiscal year, said city finance manager Dennis Grote.

According to an arrest warrant sworn out by the lead investigator Detective Dan Allen, police learned Suarez has been emptying meters of money every Saturday and Sunday morning. Lee said they believe Suarez has been pilfering parking meters for at least five years.

The warrant also implicates Suarez's wife, Rhea Suarez, and mother, Belkies Suarez, recounting statements by local bank tellers that all three would come in weekly with amounts from \$300 to \$2,000 in rolled quarters to exchange the coins for cash.

Employees at two different Wachovia Bank branches in Key West reportedly told police that Rhea Suarez would come into the branches pushing loads of rolled quarters on a hand cart. Southernmost Credit Union tellers reportedly told police all three would exchange

coins for cash until they questioned Suarez about the volume of coins.

Lee said the investigation is continuing, and he would not comment on Rhea and Belkies Suarez' roles although he did say computers from Suarez' home and his mother's financial statements and documents were seized Thursday.

Suarez was first arrested Sunday on charges of possessing cocaine, marijuana and drug paraphernalia when detectives confronted him at his home after reportedly watching him empty parking meters on Whitehead, Front and Greene streets.

According to the warrant, on May 8 Allen and Detective Pablo Rodriguez watched Suarez at meters for half an hour before 6 a.m. as he "appeared to be removing city revenue."

A week later, detectives used \$84 in marked quarters in an attempt to snare Suarez. Using technology from a Washington-based company called **DataDot Technologies**, the quarters were stamped with microscopic markings that require a black light and microscope to read, Lee said.

Detectives again watched Suarez, filming him this time as he emptied parking meters in the same area, and they confronted him after he had returned to his home around 8 a.m. in the city work truck he had been driving, according to the warrant.

They found \$2,078.66 in change in a plastic bucket in the truck, including \$28.75 in marked quarters, and subsequent interviews with city revenue personnel and parking meter collectors revealed Suarez did not turn in the meter money, according to the warrant.

City human resources director Sandy Gilbert said Suarez is on a paid administrative leave pending a hearing before City Manager Julio Avel. According to city policy, a municipal employee is entitled to a hearing with the city manager before being suspended without pay or fired, she said. No date has yet been set for the hearing.