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Eagles club says gambling charges hurt fund raising

Leaders say allegations sour grapes by past members.

By Mitch Hotts

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Leaders of a St. Clair Shores service organization say 2-year-old allegations of illegal gambling at their facility continue to hamper their ability to raise money for charity.

Four member of Fraternal Order of Eagles Aerie 3619 are accused of conspiracy and gambling charges for allegedly operating a poker machine that paid out cash prizes in their clubhouse on Greater Mack.

A hearing was scheduled for Tuesday morning in 40th District Court in St. Clair Shores, but the matter was adjourned until Nov. 27.

Carol Drake, an auxiliary secretary, and other members say until the charges are resolved, the club is having a difficult time in its fund-raising activities after the public read about the criminal charges in the newspaper.

"It is hard enough to raise funds for charity in this economy, but these allegations, which were raised by past members, have given us a black eye and make it harder to ask for donations," said Drake, a 30-year member of the group.

Court records show the suspects are charged with felony conspiracy charges that carry a penalty of up to five years in prison and a \$10,000 fine. One suspect also faces charges of money laundering, punishable by up to five years in prison and a \$50,000 fine.

Michael Norton Jr., 45, of Eastpointe, a former club president, along with members Donald "Bubba" Kukuk, 42, of Eastpointe, Ernest Grevemeyer, 65, of

Clinton Township, and Joseph Namee, 45, of St. Clair Shores, are accused of participating in the conspiracy.

Club members with knowledge of the case said the whole thing is part of an ongoing feud between two factions of the Eagles group. The old group, which reportedly initiated the criminal investigation, was evicted from the club for violating regulations.

Neil Rockind, a veteran Oakland County criminal defense attorney who represents Kukuk, has called the charges "uncommonly vague," according to court records. He said there is no proof of any conspiracy or money laundering.

Rockind said the case has taken more than two years because the Macomb County Prosecutor's Office and St. Clair Shores police have been deliberate in their investigation.

"I think there are a lot of people interested in seeing this chapter of the story resolved and allowing people back to running the club," Rockind said. "We are talking about decent, common folks who have done nothing but try to help those less fortunate in society and now they have their names smeared for no good reason."

The Macomb County Prosecutor's Office and St. Clair Shores police did not immediately return phone calls for comment.

Duke Kraus, the current club president, declined to comment because he did not want to jeopardize the integrity of the court proceedings.

Drake, the secretary, said the club's 230 members are interested in helping the community in events such as Wigs4Kids, a program that provides wigs for children who have lost their hair due to cancer.

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