

The Washington Post

Police Investigate Whether Convicted Man Faked His Death

By Matt Zapposky
Washington Post Staff Writer
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Former Calvert County cemetery owner Larry Deffenbaugh was convicted last year of pocketing nearly a million dollars that customers thought would pay for coffins, headstones and grave markers. Now, police are investigating the possibility that he's moved on to a more elaborate scheme: faking his death.

On May 10, two days before Deffenbaugh was to appear in court on a charge of violating probation, his brother called 911 to report that Deffenbaugh had vanished on a fishing trip in the Chesapeake Bay near Virginia Beach. The brother told investigators he turned around at one point and "realized that Larry was no longer on the boat," said Officer Adam Bernstein, a Virginia Beach police spokesman. An hours-long search turned up nothing, Bernstein said.

Virginia Beach police said they are working with authorities in Calvert, where an arrest warrant has been issued in connection with Deffenbaugh's failure to appear in court. Police have assigned a detective to the case, and the idea of a faked death is "certainly an avenue we're exploring," Bernstein said.

"I guess just because at this point there

hasn't been a body recovered," he said. "That could mean there just hasn't been a body recovered, or it could mean that not everything's legitimate."

Messages left for a daughter of Deffenbaugh's were not returned, and, through a lawyer, his ex-wife declined to comment. Bernstein declined to provide the name of the brother who reported that Deffenbaugh had fallen off the boat.

Deffenbaugh's attorney, Robert Harvey, said he knew nothing about the circumstances under which his client went missing, and he was taking steps to remove himself as Deffenbaugh's attorney. He said he has been unable to reach Deffenbaugh or any family members since Deffenbaugh did not appear at the May 12 hearing.

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"I have no idea where he is or what has happened to this man," Harvey said. "I have . . . notified him that I will not be representing him any further."

In September, Deffenbaugh was sentenced to five years of supervised probation for stealing from customers at Southern Memorial Gardens, one of Calvert's largest cemeteries. He was accused of bilking at least 551 people out of hundreds of thousands of dollars by taking their money as part of an agreement to prepay for burial services. He instead spent the money on car payments, fishing equipment and other expenses, authorities said.

Deffenbaugh, 57, entered an Alford plea in the case, meaning that he did not admit guilt but acknowledged that prosecutors had enough evidence to secure a conviction. His attorneys had argued that the charges stemmed from a business dispute between Deffenbaugh and the cemetery's new owners.

The judge at Deffenbaugh's sentencing suggested that any probation violation could result in his spending up to 15 years in jail. About a month later, Deffenbaugh was slapped with a violation for not turning over a gun he owned, court records show. He told his parole and probation agent that he had given the gun to a man whose name he could not remember.

Deffenbaugh did not attend the May 12 hearing on that charge. Kathryn Marsh, an assistant state's attorney in Calvert, said she received an anonymous phone call that morning, saying Deffenbaugh would not be in court because he had fallen off a boat near Chesapeake, Va.

Deffenbaugh might have been in financial trouble, according to court records. As recently as June, his ex-wife told a judge he had paid her only \$1,400 of the nearly \$200,000 he owed her under a 2006 divorce settlement. In September, he said in a court agreement that he was \$24,000 behind in child support. Court records provide no more recent information on the financial claims.

Deborah L. Chaney, whose parents were among Deffenbaugh's victims in the cemetery case, said she is skeptical of the claim that Deffenbaugh is dead.

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"They gave him all this time to plan his escape," said Chaney, whose parents were bilked out of nearly \$12,000. "He was bald on top. He's probably getting a hair transplant and growing a beard. . . . Seriously, that's the way I feel."

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