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Cemetery owner pleads no contest

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HUTCHINSON - The owner of a Hutchinson cemetery and funeral home has pleaded no contest to charges of stealing hundreds of thousands of dollars from two trust funds in a scheme that prosecutors say victimized more than 10,000 customers.

Sharon McDonough entered the pleas Thursday to 16 criminal counts in Reno County District Court. McDonough agreed to pay more than \$653,000 in restitution.

McDonough also agreed to turn over all of her rights, property and interest in Fairlawn Burial Park and Heritage Funeral Home to Ed Nazar, a Wichita attorney who has been overseeing those operations as a court-appointed receiver.

McDonough was arrested in March 2009 on charges of stealing \$800,000 from the cemetery's permanent maintenance and merchandise trust funds between 1999 and 2008. Prosecutors said the thefts involved more than 10,000 people who paid for cemetery plots and services.

McDonough remains free on \$50,000 pending sentencing scheduled by Judge Richard Rome for June 25. The plea agreement calls for a recommendation that McDonough be placed on an intensive form of probation for three years.

A civil case is pending in which the Kansas attorney general's office plans to seek additional assets from McDonough.

Nazar said McDonough's home and retirement funds are exempt from seizure in the civil litigation. He praised the Reno County district attorney's office for aiding in the collection of those assets.

District Attorney Keith Schroeder said the \$653,000 in restitution was "what we know we can prove" McDonough owes. He called the resolution a "win-win," noting McDonough's assets can be "collected up front" and the city of Hutchinson won't have to take over the cemetery's operations.

The cemetery is to be sold, and Nazar said he hoped the resolution of the criminal case would attract additional interest beyond what he already has received from potential buyers.