

BV County man sentenced for illegal U.S. reentry

BY ALLISON MOORE

A Storm Lake man who's been deported from the U.S. three times was sentenced to 20 months in federal prison for illegal reentry over a year after he was arrested for cocaine possession in Buena Vista County.



Rafael Martinez de Escobar, 39.

Rafael Martinez de Escobar, 39, pleaded guilty to one count of illegal reentry in the U.S. District Court for the Northern District of Iowa, according to federal court records filed in December. Martinez de Escobar, a Mexican citizen, allegedly admitted to illegally reentering the U.S. from Guatemala after he was deported in 2019. He was arrested and federally charged in early October.

Chief Magistrate Judge Kelly Mahoney sentenced Martinez de Escobar to 20 months in a federal prison "as close to (his) family as possible" and three years of supervised release, according to an order April 17.

It's unclear where Martinez de Escobar's family resides. Affidavits filed by the Buena Vista County Sheriff in district court February 2024 list his address in Mantorville, Minn. Around 2016, Martinez de Escobar was living in Kiron and was charged with methamphetamine distribution around Carroll and Crawford counties, according to a statement from the U.S. Attorney's Office for the Northern District of Iowa in 2018.

Martinez de Escobar is being held in the custody of a U.S. Marshall until he receives assignment to a federal prison, according to Judge Mahoney's order this month.

On Sept. 30, a week after he was convicted of a felony in Buena Vista County, Iowa Probation contacted federal Immigration and Customs Enforcement officials concerning Martinez de Escobar's citizenship status, according to a statement from the federal court in Sioux City. ICE reportedly determined Martinez de Escobar had been removed from the country three times and remains a citizen of Mexico.

Last July, Martinez de Escobar pleaded guilty to possession with intent to deliver cocaine, a felony carrying a maximum 10-year sentence, according to Buena Vista County District Court records. Senior Judge David Lester sentenced Martinez de Escobar to three years probation in lieu of the maximum sentence in an order Sept. 23. Judge Lester agreed to dismiss a lesser felony count of failure to affix a drug tax stamp, according to the order.

County sheriff's deputies arrested Martinez de Escobar at the Platinum Crush soybean plant east of Alta on Feb. 2, 2024, according to district court records. It's unclear why the deputies were dispatched to the plant. There, deputies allegedly located a pill bottle marked "Christian Cruz" containing 13.3 grams of cocaine, according to the affidavits. Martinez de Escobar allegedly admitted owning the bottle and drugs and writing the false name. He posted a \$1,000 bond the next day, according to district court records.

Brittany Hedstrom from the federal public defender's office in Sioux City represented Martinez de Escobar. Hedstrom didn't respond to calls from the Times Pilot Friday afternoon.

HOUSING: Lack of building lots an issue

Continued from page one

The city's population is expected to grow 9% this decade.

An aging population is expected to drive a need for one-level living products and age-restricted senior housing. Those above 75 are expected to grow by two-thirds this decade; those above 65 are expected to grow by one-third.

Around 60% of Storm Lake's workforce commutes to work from outside the city, which means the city can capture around thousands of workers who live outside city limits to live in town.

"Over the next decade, it's a big number: over 1,400 units," Mullins told the council in a half-hour presentation. "Big big number."

HOUSING SHORTAGE

The city has been plagued with undersupply in the last 20 years. Hence the recommendation for the city's housing stock to grow by more than a third in 10 years.

Mullins noted that Maxfield conducted a study for the city in 2017 that found the city needed 1,000 housing units by 2025 to keep up with demand. Around 455 new units were permitted in the city between 2010 and 2024, according to the study.

"Housing demand for every category is higher today than it was in 2017," Mullins said. "Your growth has exceeded the number of housing units being delivered. The gap has grown."

Half of the city's need stems from senior housing. Eight years ago, Maxfield projected the city needing 400 senior housing units. The city must now build 700 units to keep pace with demand over the next 10 years. Mullins noted the vacancy rate for senior housing is around zero percent last fall. The city should be targeting a 7% vacancy rate, he said.

"Every product type (of senior housing) is at or below market equilibrium," Mullins explained. "Our active living senior housing is pretty much full. There's no availability. You want to downsize, you want to rightsize, there's pretty much nowhere to go. You're at capacity right now in the senior housing market."

The city needs 700 units of single-family housing, condos

and rentals, both market-rate and income-restricted.

Mullins described the rental market as "dire." Maxfield estimated Storm Lake's rental vacancy rate at 1.6%. He said the city's vacancy rate should be at least 5%, or more than three times the current rate.

He described construction of single-family housing as "stale," piling in comparison to the demand. Lots are the issue. Mullins claimed there are 35 lots available for sale on Storm Lake's outskirts. He noted the city needs 285 single-family homes, townhomes and condominiums over the next 10 years to keep up with demand.

"Big, big challenge: lots," Mullins said. "Lots are the high priority to stimulate the market: get more lots in the pipeline."

There are few houses for sale. Storm Lake's homeowners are constrained by "golden handcuffs," or homes with growing values that were purchased at low interest rates. He noted around three-quarters of homes in the U.S. were purchased at interest rates below 3%. Average interest rates on 30-year mortgages are hovering around 7%.

"Short-term this is a major issue that's impacting the wholesale market because people still might not want to give up some mortgage rates, which a lot of us still have today," Mullins said.

HEADWINDS: HIGH INTEREST RATES, CONSTRUCTION COSTS, WILLING SELLERS

The city didn't meet its housing demand eight years ago because of a confluence of economic headwinds that have only grown stronger since the turn of the decade.

Interest rates are much higher than what they were in 2017. Families are having problems buying houses they could've afforded four years ago. Investors have blanched at the cost of borrowing for commercial real estate projects.

"Whether it would be new infrastructure for a new housing subdivision or a new multifamily building, the cost of money has ballooned and developers and investors are either putting projects on the shelf or waiting out the market for lower rates," the 147-page report reads of the effect of interest rates on new building. The effect is especially pronounced in a growing, small



Crime scene investigators arrive at the rural Cherokee residence Tuesday where the alleged murder of Christopher Wheeler took place. Inset: Suspect Richard Hammond. CHRONICLE TIMES photo by ERIN RYDGREN

MURDER IN RURAL CHEROKEE

Hammond ran over Sutherland man with Silverado, sheriff alleges

BY TOM CULLEN

A Cherokee man was arrested for murdering a Sutherland man who was working on a pickup in rural Cherokee.

Richard Hammond, 66, was booked into Cherokee County Jail without bond around noon Monday for first-degree murder, according to an arrest warrant filed in Cherokee County District Court. The charge stems from an incident around 12 hours earlier. An affidavit filed by the Cherokee County Sheriff alleged Hammond ran over Christopher Wheeler of

Sutherland at a residence in the 2000 mile of Highway 3.

Two witnesses told an investigating officer that Hammond "100% intended" to run over Wheeler with a Chevy Silverado at an acreage in rural Cherokee. The witnesses advised Hammond drove through a driveway toward Wheeler, who was working on a pickup. Hammond ran over Wheeler, who was running away from the attacking pickup, the affidavit alleges.

First responders arrived at the acreage shortly after a 911 call was lodged with the Cherokee County Communi-

cations Center. Cherokee police, fire and sheriff's deputies attempted lifesaving measures on Wheeler. He was pronounced dead at the scene.

Hammond was located later after he sped off from the scene, according to a news release from Sheriff Derek Scott.

A motive wasn't specified in court documents. Scott noted the incident remains under investigation by the sheriff's office and the Iowa Division of Criminal Investigation.

Hammond was released on a \$100,000 bond at around 2 p.m. Tuesday, according to

court records. Hammond posted the bond — underwritten by United States Fire Insurance Company — through Lederman Bonding of Sioux City.

Hammond was ordered to appear in court April 30. Magistrate Judge Lisa Mazurek ordered Hammond released, but required him to find his own lawyer because he isn't eligible for court-appointed counsel. Hammond wrote to Judge Mazurek that he makes \$24 an hour through his job at Hatch Masonry.



One injured in accident

The Storm Lake Police Department, Storm Lake Fire Department and Buena Vista Regional Medical Center Ambulance were dispatched Tuesday, at 12 p.m. to a motor vehicle accident at the intersection of East Lakeshore Drive and Filndt Drive in Storm Lake. Police allege a 2014 Ford being operated by Esther Haahr of Newell was traveling Eastbound on East Lakeshore Drive when Haahr failed to yield upon turning and struck a 2012 GMC Sierra driven by Maria Lopez Maldonado of Storm Lake. Haahr reported injuries related to the accident and was transported by ambulance to Buena Vista Regional Medical Center for treatment. Haahr was issued a citation for failure to yield upon a left turn, a simple misdemeanor. TIMES PILOT photo by JAMIE KNAPP

town like Storm Lake because it needs the housing for its growth, but it doesn't have the scale to attract new developers. Commercial real estate loan volume has dropped sharply as borrowing costs and tighter underwriting have resulted in projects no longer penciling.

Construction costs have also ballooned thanks to the lingering production bottlenecks of the coronavirus pandemic and President Donald Trump's trade war, which has already affected prices for raw materials like lumber and steel.

The average cost to build a new home in the Midwest crested over \$400,000 in 2023. In 2019, building a new home in the same area cost \$300,000. Building multifamily housing costs \$150,000 per unit assuming a 24-unit concept. Five years ago, those costs were less than \$100,000 per unit. The rent necessary to break even on \$150,000 per unit would be \$1,500 a month, or 67% higher than the average rent in Storm Lake.

Mullins said availability of affordable land is the most acute problem facing the city. Sellers on the outskirts of Storm Lake are fetching much higher prices than what they did in 2017, driven by skyrocketing farmland prices and farm incomes from the coronavirus pandemic. Some landowners simply refuse to sell, City Manager Keri Navratil said before Monday's meeting.

"The challenge we have today is there's nowhere to go in town for vacant lots," Mullins said. "That's a problem. In three to five years, we want to see shovel-ready lots ready to go."

SOLUTIONS?

Mullins said the city can adopt a host of programs to spur new housing at the margins.

The city can:

- Offer 40% tax breaks to landlords who agree to keep their properties affordable for 10 years
- Underwrite architectural design services for those inter-

ested in building their own homes.

- Partner with Iowa Central Community College on building trades
- Offer low interest loans for energy efficiency
- Start land banking or land trusts

- Pay rent subsidies
- Issue tax-increment financing bonds to build infrastructure for new housing
- Waive building permit fees

Navratil said before the meeting the city would take the recommendations under consideration. She noted the city is suffering from a budget crunch that forced the largest tax levy increase in her tenure with the city.

"Things are getting tighter. We have fewer tools in the toolbox to assist with economic development," Navratil said before the meeting. For

example, the city waived building permit fees, as local homebuilder Ben Friesen relocated to town. The practice stopped after council members complained that they weren't generating enough revenue for its utility franchises.

Councilwoman Maggie Martinez asked Mullins his view of modular housing, or housing prefabricated at a lumber yard or manufacturing site.

Mullins said he was interested in the concept because of the time saved while building, but he noted appraisers frown on the practice and transportation costs have skyrocketed.

"I'm all for modular. I love it, cuts time in half," Mullins told Martinez. "But until they get the cost to come off, that's all."

HAMILTON LOSS CONSULTANTS, LLC

Timothy Hamilton, Public Adjuster
PA License #8214525

Representing policy holders for their property claims to the insurance company.
40+ years adjusting property claims!

Call: 515-339-3849
Email: tim@hamiltonlawfirm.com

NEED CASH?

SELL YOUR
GOLD, DIAMONDS, AND
STERLING SILVER JEWELRY.

Paxtons Jewelry
THE DIAMOND SHOP

608 Lake Ave. Storm Lake, IA 50588
712-732-3207