

EXTORTION RING ARRESTS

Officials say phone threats in NYS also targeted Nassau

BY WILLIAM MURPHY
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Nassau County residents were among the dozens of New Yorkers who were victimized in recent months by a telephone extortion ring, officials said Tuesday in announcing the arrests of the ringleader and two others.

The ring extorted money by telling people that their relatives would be injured or shot if a payment was not made, the state attorney general's office said.

For example, a member of the ring would telephone a victim, and tell them a relative had been in a car accident and did not have money to pay medical bills, the attorney general's office said.

In other cases, the victim was simply told a relative had been kidnapped, the attorney general's office said.

A ring member sometimes claimed to be a drug dealer or a gang member "to further in-



From left, Eligio Jiminez-Correa, Orlando Gonzalez-Rivera and Giovani Ayala-Rodriguez.

still fear and compliance with his demands," the attorney general's office said in a news release.

Alleged ringleader Giovani Ayala-Rodriguez, 27, of Puerto Rico, and alleged co-conspirators Orlando Gonzalez-Rivera, 26, and Eligio Jiminez-Correa, 40, both of Syracuse, have been charged with grand larceny and related crimes, the attorney general's office said.

"As we allege, the defendants engaged in this shameful scheme to terrorize and rob New Yorkers," Attorney General Barbara Underwood

said in a news release.

The news release said more than 55 people were victimized statewide and there were "multiple" victims in Nassau County.

No dollar figure was given for the total amount of ransom paid, but the indictment, handed down in Onondaga County, cited payments of \$500 to \$990.

The most serious charges carry a penalty of up to 20 years in prison, the news release said.

The attorney general said targets of such a scam should

understand "that this type of extortion scam depends on fear" and the scammer tries to work quickly to avoid detection.

Officials advised people to never give out personal information to a stranger, never wire money to a stranger, and don't buy gift cards or money cards "for the purpose of providing the gift card numbers to someone else."

The investigation into the scam is ongoing, and anyone who may have been a victim should call State Police at 800-448-3847.

Eye on nitrogen in LI's fertilizers

BY DAVID M. SCHWARTZ
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Lawn care industry representatives sparred with environmentalists Tuesday over a state bill that would ban high nitrogen fertilizer on Long Island.

At the roundtable discussion sponsored by state Sen. Kemp Hannon (R-Garden City) at Farmingdale State College, environmentalists called the legislation a first step to reduce nitrogen in waterways without a cost to taxpayers, while opponents called the proposed cap arbitrary and ineffective.

Doug Wood, associate director of the Port Washington-based Grassroots Environmental Education, said "it's the definition of insanity" to spend millions of dollars to limit nitrogen in water and "every spring we have 18-wheelers come

over the Throgs Neck bridge loaded up with high-nitrogen fertilizer."

Fertilizer manufacturer representatives, landscapers and golf course owners said homeowners and business would simply use more fertilizer to get green lawns.

Carol Isles, president of the Long Island Nursery and Landscape Association, said the ban would drive customers to unlicensed contractors who are illegally using high-nitrogen fertilizers.

"We're a results-driven industry. Customers want results. You have no green, you have no customer," she said.

The bill would be "wiping out an entire sector of the industry," said Jeff Fedorchak, vice president of corporate affairs for TruGreen, which represents professional applicators.

The legislation, co-sponsored by Hannon and Assemb. Steven Englebright (D-Seatuket), would limit the percentage of nitrogen in fertilizers to 12 percent of volume.

Popular fertilizers currently on sale have 32 percent nitrogen. Farms would be exempt.

After the two-hour hearing, attended by about 50 landscapers and environmental advocates, Hannon said he was undecided on whether to amend the bill or press forward with it in its current form in the remaining weeks of the session.

High nitrogen levels in surface waters have been blamed for algal blooms, depleted shellfish stocks and degraded wetlands, and have become a major policy focus of state and local policymakers.

The primary source of nitrogen is wastewater from unsew-

ered homes' septic tanks and cesspools, but fertilizers are the second-leading cause, according to David Berg, program manager for the Long Island Nitrogen Action Plan, a state and local government initiative.

"We believe fertilizer, unlike wastewater, is going to be a solution that imposes little to no impact on property taxpayers. So it's important to find a solution there," Berg said.

The bill passed the Assembly earlier this month with little opposition, but industry representatives said they had been unaware of the bill.

Anthony Leung, regional water engineer for the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation, said the executive branch was working on a solution that everyone at the table could accept.



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