



# Department of Justice

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Northern District of Georgia

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

03/25/10

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## **POLK COUNTY POLICE OFFICER CHARGED WITH RUNNING A CHOP SHOP AND OBSTRUCTING A FEDERAL INVESTIGATION**

### *Officer Allegedly Tipped Off Targets That an Individual Was an Informant*

ROME, GA - MARK HOWELL SPARKS, 39, of Buchanan, Georgia, has been indicted by a federal grand jury and arraigned this afternoon on charges that he operated and maintained a chop shop, possessed vehicles and vehicle parts with altered, obliterated and removed vehicle identification numbers (VINs) and obstructed a federal investigation. SPARKS entered a plea of not guilty to the charges before United States Magistrate Judge Walter E. Johnson and granted a \$10,000 bond.

United States Attorney Sally Quillian Yates said, "This law enforcement officer is charged with taking profits in the underground trade of chopped auto parts. Worse, he further betrayed the trust placed in him, telling informants how to lie, tipping off targets of the investigation, and using his police knowledge to hide criminal activity."

Atlanta FBI Acting Special Agent in Charge Kenneth Moore said, "This matter was aggressively pursued by the FBI and its law enforcement partners in spite of efforts to obstruct our investigation. It is paramount that law enforcement maintain the trust of the public in which it serves. These charges serve as a reminder that nobody is above the law."

According to United States Attorney Yates, the charges and other information presented in court: From August 2008 through October 2009, SPARKS was employed as a detective with the Polk County Police Department. During that time the Federal Bureau of Investigation and the Polk County Police Department, working with a confidential informant, conducted a joint investigation into motor vehicle theft and chop shop activity in Polk County. During the investigation, SPARKS allegedly encouraged the informant to tell the investigators only what he knew about one of the targets of the investigation and not to tell them about anyone else who was involved in motor vehicle theft or running a chop shop in Polk County. SPARKS also allegedly tipped off targets of the investigation, telling them that the informant was cooperating with law enforcement and that the informant was wearing a recording device and recording conversations.

SPARKS allegedly maintained a chop shop himself and possessed vehicles and vehicle parts with altered, obliterated and removed VINs.

The indictment charges one count of maintaining a chop shop, which carries a maximum sentence of up to 15 years in prison and a fine of up to \$250,000; three counts of possessing vehicles or vehicle parts with altered, obliterated or removed VINs, which carries a maximum sentence of up to 10 years in prison and a fine of up to \$250,000 for each count; and two counts of obstruction of justice, which carries a maximum sentence of 20 years in prison on one count and a maximum of 5 years in prison on the other count, with a maximum fine of up to \$250,000 on each count. In determining the actual sentence, the Court will consider the United States Sentencing Guidelines, which are not binding but provide appropriate sentencing ranges for most offenders.

Members of the public are reminded that the indictment contains only allegations. A defendant is presumed innocent of the charges and it will be the government's burden to prove a defendant's guilt beyond a reasonable doubt at trial.

This case is being investigated by Special Agents of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, the Polk County Police Department, the Georgia Bureau of Investigation, the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms, and the Polk County Sheriff's Office.

Assistant United States Attorney William L. McKinnon, Jr. is prosecuting the case.

For further information please contact Sally Q. Yates, United States Attorney, or Charysse L. Alexander, Executive Assistant United States Attorney, through Patrick Crosby, Public Affairs Officer, U.S. Attorney's Office, at (404) 581-6016. The Internet address for the HomePage for the U.S. Attorney's Office for the Northern District of Georgia is [www.justice.gov/usao/gan](http://www.justice.gov/usao/gan).