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Mining for millions

Bellaire council trying to retrieve court funds, tanker accident costs

By **STEVE MARK**
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Every city has a backlog of unpaid court fees and fines.

"It's really not that unusual," reports Bellaire City Manager Bernie Satterwhite.

Monday night, Chief Financial Officer Donna Todd was asked by council members how much Bellaire is owed in past court-related monies.

"Four Million, One-Hun-

dred-and-Forty-Four Thousand Dollars," replied Todd. That's \$4,144,000.

The figure sounds massive, though could be skewed in that the sum is the unpaid total since September 1999. Nevertheless, \$4 million and change isn't chump change.

"I'm appalled we have that kind of money out there," said Councilman Jim Avioli.

Bellaire, apparently, has a reputation of being a town that

makes it easy on those who either don't show up to deal with bond warrants — sometimes speeding or parking tickets, though serious offenses are included — or doesn't necessarily follow through in collecting money owed by those who even make payment arrangements with the court.

To that end, the city has hired the law firm of Perdue, Brandon, Fielder, Collins & Mott to handle some of Bellaire's dirty

paperwork. The firm has been authorized to contact those without outstanding court fees, demanding payment.

State regulations allow such firms to tack on a 30 percent fee for collections dating after 2003; the city does not realize any of that additional fee, which goes to the collection company. For warrant-related unpaid charges prior to 2003, the firm will charge an added 15 percent.

So, Bellaire law enforcement

now has extra enforcement of its own. How much of that \$4-plus million the city actually might actually recover is difficult to predict, though most council members Monday agreed anything is better than the current return.

By the way, Perdue, Brandon, Fielder, Collins & Mott is also the city's firm that handles outstanding property tax collection.