

'Johnny Suzuki' will not serve prison time for car dealership scheme



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The car dealer known around the Lowcountry as "Johnny Suzuki" was spared prison time for his involvement in a scheme that earned him and others at least a quarter of a million dollars in dealer incentives based on fake car sales, according to prosecutors.

John Dangerfield, 51, was sentenced to three years of probation during a hearing Thursday in a downtown Charleston federal courtroom for his involvement in the inflation of the number of car sales to Suzuki Motor Corp. in order to earn reward money from the company, according to authorities.

U.S. District Judge Weston Houck accepted the terms of a negotiated plea agreement between the prosecution and Dangerfield that would keep the dealership owner out of prison.

Houck said in his career as a judge he had never accepted such terms in which attorneys negotiated the sentence. He said under different circumstances, he likely would have sentenced Dangerfield to 12 to 15 months in prison.

Houck said, however, evidence as well as statements by Dangerfield showed some Suzuki managers were aware of the scheme and also collected incentive money as well.

During a hearing last month, Assistant U.S. Attorney Nathan Williams said they had come to this agreement because it would be a complicated and difficult case to prosecute.

Dangerfield's attorney, Lionel Lofton, said while Suzuki was trying to get a foothold in the American market, certain Suzuki managers were putting pressure on dealers to sell a certain number of cars per month and instructed him to inflate the numbers.

Dangerfield submitted an Alford guilty plea, which does not admit guilt but acknowledges prosecutors have enough evidence to convict. The charge is still listed as a guilty plea.

"There's no question that what he did wasn't right, but he did it with the blessing of Suzuki," Lofton said.

Dangerfield along with four other co-defendants faked a higher number of car sales in order to collect incentive money between 2004 and 2009, according to prosecutors.

In one instance, one of the defendants listed his dog's name as a car buyer, according to



Johnny Dangerfield

prosecutors.

During an audit by Suzuki, the cars that had been fraudulently listed as sold were hid behind a church, prosecutors said.

Dangerfield once was a well-known fixture on Charleston TV. His practice was to blanket the airwaves with weekend informercials to advertise his lineup of cars and deals.

Dangerfield no longer owns the four dealerships around the state that he owned at the time of the scheme, including stores in Moncks Corner, Summerville, Myrtle Beach and Easley, according to Lofton.

He now owns and operators Auto Max in Summerville, according to Lofton.

Two co-defendants also pleaded guilty to one count of wire fraud Thursday for their involvement in the scheme.

Jeffrey Belsky, 46, and Lloyd Ray Hayes, Jr., 47, will be sentenced at a later date.

Co-defendant Robert George Low Sr. of Moncks Corner pleaded guilty to one count of wire fraud in January. He has not been sentenced yet.

The case of the remaining co-defendant, Daniel James Cory Cadden, remains pending, according to court records.

Suzuki filed for bankruptcy in the U.S. and discontinued sales of automobiles here in 2013.

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