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Apr. 03, 2013

April 03, 2013 — Political consultant Mary Ward pleaded no contest Tuesday to embezzling \$23,000 from a Merced County, California agricultural committee, although it remains to be seen whether she'll spend any time in jail.

Appearing in court with her attorney Richard Harriman, Ward, 56, entered the plea to the sole felony embezzlement count in Judge Marc Garcia's courtroom.

Ward was accused of stealing from the Agribusiness Committee of Merced County, where she served as treasurer.

In February, Garcia had allowed Ward about a month to pay off the embezzled funds.

Thus far, according to attorneys on both sides, she's paid back roughly \$6,400.

Harriman told the judge his client is waiting for money from the Internal Revenue Service, in a tax dispute involving her husband. Once Ward receives that money, Harriman told the judge, his client hopes to pay off the remaining balance of stolen funds.

Garcia on Tuesday put off Ward's sentencing until May 8, saying he hasn't determined what her sentence should be. Garcia said he'll consider that the prosecution initially offered Ward a plea deal of one year in jail and three years of probation.

On the flip side, he said the probation department recommended no jail time, with credit for time served. Ward doesn't have any prior offenses on her record.

Still, Garcia said the loss to the victims is “of great importance.” Garcia said whether

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Ward's next court date to give feedback to the judge.

Wall said the defendant has shown remorse for her crime and has cooperated with Merced police detectives.

“(Ward) pleaded exactly as she was charged,” Wall said. “She did this thing, she got caught, we filed the complaint and she has fully admitted to it.”

Harriman declined comment after the hearing. Harriman previously has said it's unlikely his client will serve any jail time.

In June 2012, Ward was investigated after the Agribusiness Committee contacted the Merced Police Department. Members of the committee became suspicious of Ward after she incorrectly reported the account fund balance.

The committee organizes the Farm City Banquet at the Merced County Fairgrounds, puts on the Progressive Agriculture Safety Day for third-graders and provides college scholarships to students in agriculture.

When questioned by Merced police detectives, Ward provided an itemized list of checks she had written to herself from the committee, according to the police report.

She told police that the IRS had frozen her assets and she was afraid of losing her home.

Ward is probably best known for her connection to Cathleen Galgiani. As a consultant for then-Assemblywoman Galgiani, Ward claimed that she was improperly fired for accusing another staffer of falsely billing his time.

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