

NEWS

Lake County chief casino fraud suspect now in jail

By **DAVID W. JONES** |

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A man suspected of falsifying petitions to get a casino initiative on the state ballot will appear in Lake County Common Pleas Court today on six felony charges after being found and arrested in California. Chief Assistant County Prosecutor Karen Kowall and the county Sheriff's Department confirm that Joseph John Copija, 62, of Oceanside, Calif., was arrested in that state and returned to Lake County by U.S. marshals. Kowall notified county Elections Board Director Janet F. Clair, who testified as a witness in a related court case wherein a jury found another suspect guilty this year. "Janet did a great job in this case," Kowall said. Clair in turn notified her four-member board at its meeting on Thursday because Clair, board Deputy Director Scott E. Daisher and elections clerks checked 15,000 signatures on petitions filed to get the casino issue on the ballot. They found only 6,405 of the signatures as eligible for the 2008 initiative. Several other counties then checked and said they also found phony signatures. Copija was indicted by a grand jury in April 2009 on three counts of election falsification, two counts of complicity to election falsification and one count of complicity to prohibitions relating to petitions. But he wasn't found until this week. An arraignment was scheduled for today before Gibson. However, he and other judges were in an out-of-town judicial conference and the schedule was unclear on Thursday. Copija and fellow Californians Deborah Ramirez and Roderice Cortez Lacy were charged with illegally paying Ohio residents to sign blank petitions to be circulated. Ramirez was found guilty in March and sentenced to 120 days in jail as a lesser party in the case. Until now, Copija and Lacy couldn't be found.

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