

# Car Dealer Accused of Scam; Md. Troopers Allegedly Cheated on Inspections

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Two Maryland state troopers performed fraudulent auto inspections that enabled a used-car dealer in Clinton to sell nearly \$3 million worth of vehicles rebuilt with stolen parts, federal prosecutors in Greenbelt said yesterday.

In an indictment handed up by a special grand jury on Wednesday, Basem Najjar, 28, the owner of Clinton Auto Sales, is charged with racketeering, mail fraud, posses-

sion and transportation of stolen auto parts, operating a "chop shop," money laundering, obstruction of justice and witness tampering.

The indictment charges Sgt. Michael R. White, 39, of the Leonardtown barracks, and retired sergeant James A. Downing, 49, of Upper Marlboro, with five counts of mail fraud each. Each of those counts carries a maximum five-year prison term.

Najjar and Downing were arrested yesterday, and White, who is

not in custody, was scheduled for a court appearance at a later date, authorities said.

"We will continue our efforts to fight automobile theft by punishing the chop shops that make the crime profitable," U.S. Attorney Lynne A. Battaglia said in a statement. "We will also prosecute police officers who choose to assist an unlawful businessman rather than perform their duties in the proper manner."

Prosecutors said most of the cars that Najjar sold were "sal-

vage" vehicles that he purchased at auction and rebuilt. The state requires qualified police officers to inspect and confirm the "roadworthiness" of such vehicles, and White and Downing allegedly approved more than 350 of them between 1992 and 1996.

Prosecutors said the troopers did so in violation of state police rules, sometimes approving vehicles that had not been rebuilt yet. In return, they allegedly received "things of value" from Najjar, including cars and unspecified amounts of cash.

Capt. Greg Shipley, a state police spokesman, said that White was suspended in March 1997 as a result of the investigation and that Downing retired in July 1996. He noted that state police detectives worked with FBI and Internal Revenue Service agents on the investigation that led to this week's indictments.

Najjar allegedly obtained car parts from stolen vehicles, stored them, then installed them in salvage vehicles. Sometimes parts allegedly were put back into the

same cars from which they had been stolen. He also was charged with removing or tampering with identification numbers on motor vehicles and auto parts.

After federal agents executed search warrants at his business in early November 1998, Najjar allegedly asked witnesses to withhold information about his operation and lie to investigators.

Najjar faces a total of 23 criminal counts, which carry maximum sentences ranging from five to 20 years. No trial date has been set.