

State probes claim that business idea was stolen

Development agency head target of allegation

By TOM PELTON
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The state prosecutor is investigating allegations that the chairman of the Anne Arundel County Economic Development Corp. helped steal a business idea for a

company in which he holds a financial interest.

Jay I. Winer, a Crofton developer, is chairman of the board of the county-funded agency that provides loans to new business ventures. He is also a director of West Shore Communications, a local company that owns radio towers.

Two Annapolis entrepreneurs say they went to the development agency last year for help in building a network of microwave towers

that would improve cellular telephone links to the Eastern Shore.

Jane and George Chamberlain got a \$25,000 loan. But, they say, they also got their idea stolen.

The two allege that Winer passed the idea to Mark C. Sapperstein, one of the partners in his radio-tower business, who is now thinking of starting a similar enterprise.

"Nobody stole any ideas. Nobody's profiting from this or going anywhere with this," said Sapperstein, president of West Shore Communications.

"George [Chamberlain] had an idea that might or might not work. We tried to work out a business arrangement, and it didn't work out. It's that simple."

Officials at the state prosecutor's office, which investigates charges of misconduct in public office, refused to confirm or deny that they were looking into the al-

legations.

But sources close to the investigation said the office has interviewed the Chamberlains and asked for hundreds of documents concerning their negotiations with the development corporation.

Jerry Klasmeyer, head of central services for Anne Arundel County, said investigators had requested copies of county records relating to a lease the county signed last year with West Shore Communications for antenna space atop a county water-storage tank near Pasadena.

The Chamberlains "have apparently convinced themselves that there is a conspiracy here." But I just don't see any evidence of it," said Klasmeyer.

In May 1996, the Chamberlains — George, an engineer, and Jane, a marketing expert, who run a company called Link Telecommunications out of their home — approached NationsBank for a business loan to build a network of 13 microwave towers between Sykesville and Ocean City.

Their idea was that the tower system would provide a more economical way for businesses to communicate via data-carrying digital cellular phones, pagers and computers. Part of their idea hinged on improving communications between Maryland's Eastern and Western shores.

NationsBank turned the Chamberlains down but referred them to the Economic Development Corp.

In June, the Chamberlains received approval from Winer for \$25,000. He also

suggested that the Chamberlains discuss the idea with Sapperstein.

After five months of discussion about a possible partnership, the talks fell through.

Sapperstein told the Chamberlains their company was not financially strong enough to handle the deal, and that he would buy microwave communication equipment directly from a manufacturer, rather than from them, if he decided to proceed.

In December, Sapperstein formed a company called Mari-link, which the Chamberlains believe is a first step toward starting a company based on their idea.

Sapperstein said Mari-link is a "shell company" and that he hasn't decided what to do with it. Winer could not be reached for comment, and Jane Chamberlain refused to discuss the matter.