

OFFICE OF THE
DISTRICT ATTORNEY
COUNTY OF SANTA BARBARA

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District Attorney



DA 10-207

RELEASE NUMBER

October 31, 2013

RELEASE DATE

APPROVED BY *Joyce E. Dudley*
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***** PRESS RELEASE *****

October 31, 2013

Re: *People v. Penny Art Estes*

Santa Barbara County District Attorney Joyce Dudley announced today that Penny Art Estes, age 64, pled to 28 Felony Counts and admitted 21 Special Allegations in connection with defrauding victims of the Jesusita and Tea Fires. Estes, formerly of Rialto, California, was charged with multiple felony counts of diverting construction funds, grand theft, theft by false pretenses, theft from an elder or dependent adult and failure to file state income tax returns for 2009, 2010 and 2011. Estes also admitted special allegations, which included defrauding victims of a natural disaster and theft in excess of \$500,000.00.

A multi-agency investigation, which was spearheaded by District Attorney Investigator Norma Hansen, revealed that Estes, the CEO of Green Building America, came to Santa Barbara after the Jesusita Fire and Tea Fire and began entering into building contracts with victims of those two devastating fires. Estes claimed to have a "green" building block which was better than conventional building materials. Estes gained the confidence of her victims and then took the victims' insurance money, as well as other building funds from other sources and failed to complete the rebuild of their homes. In the most extreme cases Estes, took hundreds of thousands of dollars from victims and did no construction work at all. Bank records show that Estes used most of the money for shopping excursions, airfare, expensive dinners, hotels, travel and other extravagances completely unrelated to the rebuilding of the victims' homes. The investigation revealed that Estes took in close to \$4.8 million dollars from the Santa Barbara fire victims.

Estes also pled guilty to three felony counts for defrauding an elderly victim from Riverside County. The Riverside charges involved the theft of money from an 82 year old victim who contracted with Estes to construct a commercial building in Cathedral City. The victim paid Estes \$536,000.00 and was left with vacant lot. The investigation revealed that Estes used money taken from the Riverside victim to begin funding her illegal activities in Santa Barbara.

The District Attorney's office did not offer any plea bargain in this case. Estes will be sentenced on November 26, 2013 in Department 12 of the Santa Barbara Superior Court. She faces a maximum sentence of 36.6 years in State Prison. Estes remains in custody in the Santa Barbara County Jail, with bail set at \$4.5 million dollars.

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