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Land scam victims step forward

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Two months ago, my colleague Gabriella Souza and I wrote about a scam targeting foreign owners of land here.

We looked through thousands of property transfer records and thought we had identified all the Lee County cases - about \$1 million in stolen property.

But after we wrote our story, another victim came forward, and people called to say they had been approached by this scammer. So it might be good for readers to know how it works:

- Step 1: Someone saying he's the foreign owner of a vacant parcel

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emails a local real estate agent to list the property for sale.

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- Step 2: When the property is sold to an unsuspecting buyer, the seller/scammer has the documents notarized in the West African country of Benin by "Lambert Shemite" and sends them to a local title company.

- Step 3: The title company receives instructions to wire the payment to the Bank of China.

- Step 4: The title company files the notarized deed with the county clerk of courts who records the transaction.

Because the owners are foreigners, it can take months - even up to a year - to discover their land was sold. The buyer, who is also a victim, has no idea they own a stolen lot.

Friedrich Heindl, a Realtor in Cape Coral, was contacted by friends in Germany earlier this year who told him they received a tax document for the sale of a lot they owned in Cape Coral.

Heindl went to the property appraiser's website and discovered his friends were no longer listed as the lot owners.

Heindl blames the real estate agents who take the listings from the scammer. "You listed my friends' lot for \$52,000? The lots are going for \$150,000," he said.

Heindl said agents should have smelled a fraud when:

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- The email addresses were hotmail and gmail.
- The documents were shipped to a country that didn't match the owners' country in the property records.
- The seller agreed to sell for ridiculously low offers.

Heindl also has harsh words for title companies. "You're having, in Africa, some dude notarize the contract? You don't send the closing documents to Germany? And you send the money to China? There are so many red flags it's not funny," Heindl said.

But not everyone has fallen for this scam. Susan Malach, a Fort Myers title agent, related this story to my colleague Souza:

Malach was handling the sale of a lot by a foreign owner. The documents appeared in order, but she became suspicious because the deed was notarized in Benin. She found a different email for the owner and sent him a message asking if he was selling his property. She quickly received an emphatic "No."

Malach reported the incident to the Lee County Sheriff's Office on Oct. 25. The economic crimes unit did not investigate, spokeswoman Sgt. Stephanie Eller told Souza, because no crime had occurred.

Malach said it still scares her that the notary on all the scams is the same. "It's not like we have hundreds of different scammers that have suddenly hit," she said in an email. "It's basically the same person or group."

- Email Melanie Payne at tellmel@news-press.com, call 344-

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