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# Ex-police chief guilty of official misconduct The former Runnemede official will pay a \$15,000 fine and \$3,500 to the town. He was caught in a brothel raid.

June 09, 2004 | By Frank Kummer INQUIRER STAFF WRITER

Runnemede's former police chief avoided jail yesterday by pleading guilty to official misconduct stemming from his arrest during a police raid on a Maple Shade brothel.

Instead, James M. Leason agreed to pay the maximum \$15,000 fine as well as \$3,500 in restitution to Runnemede as part of a plea agreement with the Burlington County Prosecutor's Office. In return, a second charge of promoting prostitution was dropped.

The 56-year-old Leason, Runnemede's chief for more than 17 years, will be banned from holding public office or a government job again.

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Dressed in dark suit and white tie, the burly Washington Township resident appeared relaxed, chatting in a hallway of Burlington County Superior Court before his plea. He was somber before Judge John Almeida, answering simply yes or no to a series of questions.

"It's a disgrace to his office, simple as that," Burlington County Prosecutor Robert D. Bernardi said after the brief hearing. "Now he can't even be a janitor in the municipal hall."

Bernardi said his office had asked for the restitution without prompting from Runnemede. That has the effect of forcing Leason to give back part of a package the borough gave him on his retirement. That package was part of an agreement made before his arrest as well as legal obligations.

Leason had retired March 1 as a result of the charges.

Bernardi said he was so troubled by Leason's receiving the package, \$1,000 toward his pension and \$2,500 as a raise, that he wanted restitution for borough taxpayers. "I thought the people of Runnemede were owed better than that," he said.

Runnemede Mayor Frank Hartman said the borough would put the money into the borough's general fund. "I'll be happy when this whole thing goes away," he said. "It's been a big embarrassment to the town."

The official misconduct charge against Leason stems from witnessing a crime but taking no action by either making an arrest or informing law enforcement. He originally faced 10 years in jail. Bernardi said yesterday that Leason's actions did not warrant jail. Leason remains free on \$5,000 bail until his sentencing Aug. 6.

Leason was arrested in the parking lot of the Arbors Apartments on South Lenola Road in Maple Shade on Jan. 26, when police raided the brothel. An investigation showed that Leason had visited there previously.

On the day of his arrest, he negotiated a \$150 rebate from a prostitute through a friend who was acting as a law-enforcement informant.

Authorities learned of Leason's visits to the brothel because an informant had secretly recorded more than 50 phone calls in the previous months, court documents show. Five others were arrested in the raid.

Leason was appointed Runnemede's chief in 1987, three years after being demoted to patrolman for involvement in a ticket-fixing incident.

After his arrest at the brothel, Leason was suspended, and then he retired with 31 years of law enforcement service.

Lt. Mark Diano, a 28-year veteran of the department, has since been sworn in as chief.

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