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Local News

Bal Harbour residents cleared from repaying drug seizure money

BAL HARBOUR, Fla. (WSVN) -- Bal Harbour residents and officials are breathing a collective sigh of relief following a U.S. Department of Justice decision stipulating the village is not required to repay millions of dollars seized in drug and money laundering investigations.

Federal investigators claimed much of this money was misspent, a finding that led to the firing of police chief Thomas Hunker. In addition, the department's drug seizure unit was dissolved as a result of the investigation.

The ruling reads in part, the government "will not require BHPD to return and additional funds because of impermissible expenditures."

"They were no longer going to pursue any remedies against the Village of Bal Harbour," said Bal Harbour attorney Dan Gelber.

When the federal investigation was first reported in December of 2012, Bal Harbour residents expressed concern that they may have to pay back up to \$4 million in taxpayer money. "It's a relief that the residents will not have to pay out of their pockets," said a resident.

Village officials took immediate steps, returning \$1.2 million to the government and removing Hunker from his post.

"I think, certainly, with regard to the payment of any funds coming from the village and its citizens, that should be in history right now," Gelber said. "At the end of the day, the Justice Department decided that there was no reason or basis for them to go anymore at the village."

Bal Harbour residents said they are relieved this turbulent chapter in their village's history appears to be over. "I think we're paying enough taxes at the Village of Bal Harbour, and any less or any more would make a substantial difference," said a woman. "I'm happy not to have to pay any more."

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