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Warrants alleging computer hacking served

By: JOHN HALL - Staff Writer

MENIFEE -- Search warrants were served and numerous computers seized, authorities said Tuesday, after evidence of hacking was traced back to the home of a Menifee man embroiled in a heated dispute with the homeowners association for which he previously worked.

No arrests had been made as of Tuesday evening.

On Feb. 21, investigators descended on a home in the 30000 block of Via Palermo in Menifee, belonging to Don Harris, the former lake manager for Menifee Lakes Master Association.

Computers that were hacked belonged to members of the association and its supporters, authorities said.

"I haven't broken any laws," Harris said by telephone Tuesday evening, calling accusations that he is involved "baloney."

"I'm a 60-year-old man. I have no interest in hacking into someone's computer," Harris said. "I wouldn't know how to do that if my life depended on it."

At the same time the warrant was served at Harris' home last week, a second was served at a home in Watsonville in the Monterey Bay area.

Harris said he has no connection with the man whose home was raided in Watsonville, but did say he is aware the man used to live in Menifee.

"But I have no knowledge of any activity he may or may not have been doing," he added.

Law enforcement authorities say their investigation started with the Northern California location and ended up back here in Menifee.

"We had previously received a case involving computer intrusion in which several computers were compromised," Riverside County sheriff's Sgt. Rick Waltch said Tuesday. Waltch supervises a multi-agency task force formed to apprehend and prosecute criminals using technology in three Southern California counties.

"We determined the intrusion was initiated from the Watsonville area," he said. "We worked backward from there and found it may involve another person from Menifee."

Four or five computers were seized from Harris' home, Waltch said, while three were taken from the residence in Watsonville.

The sergeant said investigators are looking into the connection between Harris' home and the one in Watsonville.

Computer forensic experts are still examining the machines seized, a process Waltch said could be completed in about a month.

The intrusion into various local computers came via an e-mail attachment sent to board members of the master association, Waltch said. Once opened, the attachment allowed the hacker to take control of the infected computers, and change passwords.

E-mails sent by the hackers included comments critical of the association board and in favor of Harris, Waltch said.

The board had contracted with Harris for several years through his company, Professional Aquatic Safety Services, for management of the lagoon and lake facilities. That contract was terminated in 2006.

According to a civil lawsuit filed last year by Harris against the association and some of its board members, Harris alleged such things as a hostile work environment and harassment, claiming he has incurred financial and emotional distress because the contract was not renewed.

Through his lawsuit, he alleges -- among other things -- that false statements were made about him in an effort to get him fired.

The lawsuit is still wending its way through the Riverside County court system.

Harris was also part of a group of Menifee residents who tried to recall the five-member association board. The recall failed in January.

Harris said Tuesday he believes he knows why the investigation that led to the search warrant at his home came about.

"It's because I've exposed improprieties and wrongdoing by certain members of the board in the past," he said.

Harris pointed the finger specifically at two people he believes are at the core of the accusations, two men who are members of a group that set up a Web site in support of the board and against the recall effort, www.MenifeeTruth.com.

"This is another example of the efforts of Rick Savard and Jim Roach to defame, libel and slander me," Harris said, adding that they have been "leveling false accusations against me for the past six months."

According to authorities, the Menifee Truth Web site was also targeted in the hacker attack.

Savard said Tuesday that he and Roach discovered their Web site was being hacked on the evening of Oct. 25.

"Pages were disappearing right before our very eyes," Savard said as he recalled watching it happen on his personal computer.

"We realized we couldn't get into the Web site and change the password," he added, saying that the

hacker had already changed it and was deleting or changing pages on the site.

A page was added that attacked the recall group as well, Savard said.

Accusations were also levied by the hacker that one of the association board members was a child molester, Savard added.

"We were violated," Savard said. "It was a very scary time."

Waltch, of the high-tech task force, said the criminal investigation thus far has not revealed any monetary damage.

"But we certainly needed to show (the hackers) that they can't get away with this," the sergeant said.

Investigators will soon be forwarding their case to the district attorney's office, which will then determine whether any criminal charges will be filed and against whom.

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