MORGAN COUNTY D.A.

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PRESS RELEASE

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|  | Morgan Jury Among First to Reject Sentencing Guidelines *Car Dealership Owner Faces Maximum Sentence of 99 Years to Life* |

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|  | **DECATUR, Ala, Feb. 6, 2020** — The owner of a former Decatur car dealership faces a maximum sentence of 99 years or life in prison after a Morgan County jury on Thursday found there were aggravating factors to the multiple fraud-related charges to which he pled guilty, Morgan County District Attorney Scott Anderson announced.  Gregory Ray Steenson, 50, of Decatur, defrauded victims out of more than $134,000, Anderson said.  He pled guilty to Theft in the First Degree (seven counts), Theft in the Second Degree and Possession of a Forged Instrument. The jury’s finding of aggravating factors means Steenson can receive a sentence high than those set forth in the Alabama Sentencing Guidelines, according to Anderson.  After his guilty pleas, Steenson and Anderson agreed for a Morgan County jury to hear the issue of whether sufficient aggravating factors existed to allow Circuit Judge Charles Elliott to make an upward departure from the Alabama Sentencing Guidelines. The departure was requested by Anderson prior to this week’s jury term in Morgan Circuit Court as is required by law.  According to Anderson, only a handful of cases in Alabama have resulted in jury verdicts on departure motions since the inception of the Alabama Sentencing Guidelines. It is believed by court officials that this is the first instance where a separate trial on aggravators was held, Anderson said. A jury was struck to hear this issue on Wednesday and returned their verdict just after noon on Thursday.  The jury found four aggravating factors stemming from Steenson’s fraudulent business practices in his role as an owner and operator of Performance Auto Sales on Point Mallard Parkway.  First, his misconduct involved a taking or receipt of property of great monetary value or caused a great monetary loss to the victims. The state argued that victims were defrauded out of more than $134,000 by Steenson.  Second, the offense involved a high degree of sophistication or planning. Third, Steenson violated a court order enjoining him form selling vehicles in the commission of the fraud. And, finally, Steenson’s conduct posed a danger to the public.  Thursday’s jury verdict was a rejection of the Alabama Sentencing Guidelines in this case and paves the way for Elliott to sentence under the full range of punishment available for these charges, the most serious of which are Class B felonies. Steenson’s prior conviction in Federal Court for Bank Fraud is expected to elevate his range of punishment for these offenses under the Alabama Habitual Felony Offender Act as well. Steenson will face a maximum sentence of 99 years or life on his most serious convictions.  Anderson said Steenson will have an opportunity to file mitigating factors for sentencing, which may also be considered by Judge Elliott on April 29, when he conduct’s Steenson’s sentencing hearing.  ### |

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