

THE SAMPSON INDEPENDENT

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140,000 seized

By Chris Berendt

NEWTON GROVE — More than \$140,000 was seized during a routine traffic stop on U.S. 701 Thursday when the driver attempted to flee from law enforcement officers and was apprehended moments later, according to reports from Sampson County Sheriff's authorities who made the seizure.

A subsequent search of the 1999 Honda Accord being driven by Rigoberto Rivera, 25, of 323 Flowers Road, Mount Olive, revealed numerous stacks of money found within a duffel bag and in the vehicle.

According to reports, the vehicle was stopped at around 4 p.m. Thursday on U.S. 701, south of Newton Grove. The stop was conducted by officers with the Sheriff's Highway Enforcement Awareness Team, who were working motor vehicle enforcement and interdiction in the area when they observed an Accord with a window tint violation, reports state.

The officers stopped the vehicle and a Sheriff's Office K-9 gave a positive "alert" on the vehicle regarding the presence of narcotics. As officers interviewed the driver, Rivera, the suspect reportedly attempted to escape. Following a short foot pursuit, officers took Rivera into custody.

During a search of the vehicle, HEAT officers discovered \$140,000 in cash, which authorities said was concealed in different locations. According to sheriff's officials, neither Rivera nor his passenger, claimed ownership of the cash.

Rivera was charged with resist, delay and obstruction of an investigation and taunting a police K-9. He was placed in the Sampson County Detention Center under \$3,000 secured bond. The passenger, who authorities said was cooperative, was released.

Sheriff's officials said the cash was seized according to Federal forfeiture guidelines and the case has been adopted by the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration.

Federal forfeiture statutes allow law enforcement agencies to seize real property, cash, vehicles or any other form of alleged illegally gained assets used in drug trafficking or the product of drug trafficking. The law does not law the transport of more than \$10,000 without the proper federal documentation.

"This traffic stop reinforces the need for a proactive team of officers, dedicated to looking for criminal activity through motor vehicle enforcement," said Sheriff Jimmy Thornton. "With the amount of drugs and drug money being transported throughout our county on a daily basis, it is imperative that we remain vigilant and do everything that we can to interrupt the drug trade."

Following such seizures, law enforcement agencies often then hand over cash and any other seized assets to federal authorities with the hopes that it may be able to recoup some of those funds. Federal laws allow for agencies to receive up to 80 percent of money seized during such stops.

"The HEAT officers," stated Thornton, "have been invaluable in putting a dent in the drug dealers' wallets."

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