Ex-Ridgewood inspector admits to stealing $460,000 in quarters from village

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There are coin collectors, and then there's Thomas Rica. While the true hobbyist seeks quality coinage, Rica was more interested in quantity — amassing 1.8 million individual quarters. Mitsu Yasukawa\Staff Photographer Thomas Rica in court Wednesday. Unfortunately, he acquired them illegally. Rica — once employed as Ridgewood's public works inspector — quite literally pocketed himself a small fortune over 25 months before his arrest last year. All told, the 43-year-old Hawthorne resident admitted on Wednesday that he had stolen at least $460,600 from the village's coin-collection room. Collectively, his take weighed 11.25 tons, according to the U.S. Mint. That's the equivalent of three elephants, a single 84-passenger bus or nine Honda Civics. But Rica didn't deposit it all at once; he cashed in the loose change over time at several bank branches using coin machines to avoid detection, authorities said. Rica, wearing brown pants and a blue blazer over a blue shirt and a red, patterned tie, was mostly silent as he pleaded guilty to four counts of third-degree theft. He will not serve a day in prison under the terms of a deal accepted by Judge John Conte in Superior Court in Hackensack. Instead, he must pay it all back. Each count, Conte noted, is normally punishable by a maximum of five years in prison. Rica's lawyer, Robert Galantucci, said that the former village employee couldn't resist the temptation the coin-storage room presented and that his client "acknowledged it was wrong and is trying to make it right" by paying restitution. Another village employee eventually noticed that some coins were missing and contacted the police, officials said. Rica was arrested last year and charged with taking $500 in coins and fired. But a yearlong investigation by Bergen County authorities determined that Rica, in fact, had stolen a lot more. Officials on Wednesday said that the coins were taken slowly, steadily, and by the fistful from a room in Village Hall, where quarters from Ridgewood's parking meters are stored. Rica did not have authorization to enter the meter-collection room but used a master key he was given "due to the nature of his position" to gain repeated access to it, village officials confirmed on Wednesday. Ridgewood collected $800,000 in quarters from meters in 2013, village officials said. It was unclear on Wednesday just how often Rica was stopping into the coin-storage room, but officials with the Bergen County Prosecutor's Office said in an email that "during some weeks, quarters were taken several times during the week." On four separate occasions over those two years, Rica removed more than $500 in quarters from the room, but usually, "the amount he took would vary, depending on how much was there,"

Galantucci said after the hearing. Rica, who was making $86,000 a year, admitted in court he deposited all of the coins he had taken into his own personal bank accounts. Later, Galantucci said his client — a married father of two children — used the money to pay his usual expenses, noting he did nothing "illicit" with the cash. The Prosecutor's Office said that Rica's deposits raised no red flags with authorities as "coin machines at several different bank branches were used to count the coins and print out a receipt for deposit." Galantucci said that his client regrets taking the money, and is focused on "putting his life back together." Under his plea agreement, Rica will pay back what he owes over the course of his probation, which will run five years, court officials said. Rica will make an initial lump sum down payment of $69,000 at his sentencing on June 6, followed by at least $2,000 a month to the village for five years, under the deal's terms, which were set by the Prosecutor's Office. Rica also loses his $30,000 pension for 10 years of service from the village, as well as $8,400 in accrued time he was owed at the time of his dismissal, according to the agreement. The terms also dictate Rica can never work for another municipality in New Jersey. Galantucci said his client now works for his brother's construction firm. Rica was first charged in January 2013 with fourth-degree theft and hindering apprehension. Mayor Paul Aronsohn on Wednesday called the theft "outrageous and seemingly incomprehensible," and said Rica "shamelessly and aggressively violated the public trust." A collective statement from the village council expressed shock over the extent of Rica's crime and vowed to make sure such thefts won't be repeated. "We have and will continue to make sure that the additional security steps taken since Mr. Rica's arrest remain sound and effective," the statement said. Aronsohn said a forensic review by an independent entity was likely. This is not the first time a Ridgewood employee has been in trouble over parking fees. In 2012, a former Ridgewood parking enforcement officer, Christopher Foxon, was arrested after a monthlong investigation revealed he issued tickets to vehicles that weren't in violation of parking-meter rules. The tickets were subsequently dismissed. From 2010 through 2012, Foxon issued 5,422 parking tickets, according to data maintained by the state Administrative Office of the Courts. According to the Prosecutor's Office, charges against Foxon were dropped last year after he completed a Pretrial Intervention Program. Staff Writer Dave Sheingold contributed to this article. Email:harrisc@northjersey.com