

Would-Be Developer Of Hartford Soccer Stadium Has Record Of Embezzlement, Lawsuits



The once proud Dillon Stadium, home to many local high school football games, is now overgrown and deteriorating. There is a proposal to demolish the stadium and build a 15,000-seat soccer stadium on the site. (STEPHEN DUNN / Hartford Courant)

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A Somers businessman pitching a multimillion-dollar deal to bring professional soccer to Hartford has a felony conviction for embezzlement and has faced a string of legal judgments in at least four states for failing to pay personal and professional debts, a Courant investigation has found.

James C. Duckett Jr., the CEO of Black Diamond Consulting and majority owner of the Hartford City FC soccer club, says he plans to raise \$30 million to \$40 million to build a soccer stadium at the site of the soon-to-be-demolished Dillon Stadium in Colt Park.

He is proposing a 49-year lease with Hartford officials for the rights to the land, for which he would pay the city the greater of \$500,000 or 10 percent of net revenues.

Duckett acknowledged he was convicted of embezzlement in 1999 in connection with his work for Northern Virginia Temporaries, a staffing agency in Fairfax County. Duckett said that in the late 1990s, when he was playing on practice squads with the Washington Redskins, a friend working at the agency suggested that Duckett could use his name recognition to attract national accounts.

One of Duckett's largest accounts, Oracle Corp., had cut back on the number of temporary workers it needed from the agency, but inadvertently continued for months to send payment for the full complement of staffers, Duckett said. The excess money — more than \$200,000 before it was discovered — went into Duckett's account.

"So that situation was under my name so it was either the company or myself taking the hit, and I took the hit," Duckett said in an interview Tuesday, explaining his guilty plea.

"Everything was paid back," he said. "I was young, not being on top of things, and that's what happened."

City Councilman Kenneth Kennedy, who has led the effort to redevelop Dillon Stadium on the city side, said Tuesday that he was not aware of Duckett's embezzlement conviction, and said it "does make you rethink some things."

But he said private money was financing the new stadium, and that if Duckett's partners had confidence in him, "I think that's enough for the city.

"We should remember the city has minimal risk here. I don't see anybody else on the horizon who could bring these kind of dollars to get this thing done," Kennedy said. "It was 16 years ago. I don't want selective forgiveness. I think all people should be given another chance. We've all made mistakes. I certainly have made my share. A lot has changed in 16 years and I think James should be given the benefit of the doubt."

Duckett was given a suspended two-year prison sentence and probation. He said he could have sought to have the case expunged. "But I have nothing to hide," he said. "We learn from our mistakes and that made me a sharper person."

Duckett has also faced liens and legal judgments at least a dozen times, including a string of unpaid dental, hospital, child-support and other bills dating back to 1997. In two court cases, Duckett was threatened with civil arrest for failing to comply with court orders.

He said Tuesday that some of the suits were the result of business relationships that went bad. Others, he acknowledged, stemmed from his not keeping careful watch on financial matters.

"It's one of those things that if you haven't been sued before, you haven't done business," Duckett said. "It's not easy. People try to take advantage of you. A lot of things is my stubbornness, but at the same time my not being on top of things and trying to prove a point and dealing with so much."

Duckett, in fact, said he was unaware of some of his legal travails, including an \$8,200 judgment in 2010 in a Massachusetts suit brought by Edwin H. Howard, an attorney who is part of the executive team at Black Diamond

Consulting. Duckett called Howard, who said he didn't recall the case either. "It might have been a long time ago. I don't remember," Howard said.

While Duckett will finance new construction, the city will pay for demolition of the old stadium and site preparation for the new structure. Officials have not given an estimate for how much that would cost, except to say it would be less than \$1 million. The council had approved \$12 million in bonding for the project but would use only a small portion of that, Kennedy said. The rest would be for other initiatives.

Premier Sports Management Group was the sole bidder of a request for proposals to redevelop Dillon Stadium. The agency has said it would pay for the new 15,000-seat stadium's design, construction and furnishings. A professional soccer team would begin playing there as early as April 2017. Premier Sports recently became a subsidiary of Black Diamond Consulting, making Duckett the lead developer.

Duckett said his struggles have helped build Black Diamond into a business capable of delivering the ambitious soccer stadium proposal. "Those are the things that ... we grow from and that's made me the tough exterior that I am today," Duckett said. "Certain people, we have stories. Those stories aren't complete until you go through some rough things."

String of judgments

In the legal arena, Duckett's roughest case came in 2009, in a suit brought by M&T Bank over a motor vehicle that Duckett said he provided to a former business partner. Court records indicate that Duckett was found in contempt of court and a civil arrest warrant was issued. M&T Bank ultimately was awarded more than \$84,000 — the largest judgment Duckett has faced.

But in August 2012, the bank sued Duckett again, in Connecticut Superior Court, saying the debt "remains fully unsatisfied despite repeated demands for

payment." Duckett did not respond to the suit and judgment was entered in the bank's favor.

In March 2013 a state marshal attempted to locate accounts belonging to Duckett at Webster Bank, People's United Bank, TD Bank, Sovereign Bank, Citizens Bank, Wells Fargo Bank, First Niagara Bank and Bank of America, but none reported having accounts in Duckett's name.

Duckett was later subpoenaed to appear in court to disclose the location of his assets, but it doesn't appear that hearing ever took place. Although the case remains open, Duckett said he has resolved all of his past legal matters.

Duckett has faced at least three other suits in Connecticut, the smallest of which was a 2012 small claims court case involving an unspecified contract dispute. Duckett did not respond to the suit and was ordered to pay about \$2,600.

Duckett paid \$32,000 after losing a 2012 case brought by a neighbor who loaned Duckett and his company \$25,000 three years earlier. Daniel Eastman said Duckett failed to repay the money, and he also sought damages for an incident in which three of Duckett's dogs attempted to break through the door to Eastman's home and attack his dog. Eastman's wife was injured in the melee and the court added about \$7,200 in medical and veterinary bills, and pain and suffering.

Duckett said the dispute was more complicated and involved his neighbor's efforts to get an easement on the property where Duckett was living.

As before, a marshal searched 11 banks and credit unions after the judgment was entered, but reported she was unable to find any accounts belonging to Duckett. Lawyers for the neighbor sought to summon Duckett to a court hearing to ask about his assets, but said repeated efforts to serve a subpoena

were unsuccessful and that Duckett did not respond to attempts by a marshal to contact him.

"This judgment debtor must not be allowed to continue to thumb his nose at the judicial system's apparent inability to serve him and compel his appearance at court," attorney Brian S. Newman wrote in seeking permission to dispense with the requirement that Duckett be served in person.

Duckett did appear in court in July 2014 and, according to court filings, told Newman he was about to receive a sum of money sufficient to pay the judgment. Later that month, he gave Newman a check for \$10,000 — but the check bounced twice.

The check was signed by Duckett but was drawn on a bank account with the name James H. Duckette. Duckett said that was his father — who a few years ago obtained his birth certificate and learned he had an "e" on the end of his name. Shown a copy of the check Tuesday, Duckett said he had not realized he used his father's account, and said that error explained why there were insufficient funds for the check to clear.

After the check bounced, he said, "I went back and took care of that right away."

But in fact, months passed. After the check bounced in July 2014, Duckett said he would pay the entire debt by Sept. 2, 2014, and he was ordered to either pay in full or show up in court on that date with the financial records Newman had subpoenaed. He did neither, court records show.

A civil arrest warrant was later issued for Duckett, but was vacated after Duckett hired an attorney who coordinated the payment of part of the debt. Last July, more than two years after Duckett was ordered to pay, Newman reported to the court that the full judgment had been satisfied.

The lawsuit was not Duckett's only run-in with his neighbors. In October 2013, the neighbors complained to state police about an ongoing problem of Duckett's dogs roaming on their property. Duckett was issued a \$92 ticket, which he never paid or contested. Last January, a judge issued a warrant for his arrest for failing to pay, although that warrant was never served. Duckett said Tuesday he was unaware of the case and had no idea a warrant had been issued.

Duckett also faced a lawsuit filed last year by Dr. Ricky Lee Ramsey, a co-owner of Black Diamond Consulting and the owner of the \$1.15 million house where Duckett lives and Black Diamond Consulting is located. Ramsey's complaint states that he and Duckett had an oral month-to-month lease agreement for the 8,600-square-foot home that Ramsey, who lives in Virginia, bought in 2009.

The lawsuit claims that Duckett stopped paying rent, leading Ramsey to send Duckett an order to leave the house. They later reached an agreement allowing Duckett to stay three more months if he paid \$10,000 toward the back rent. Duckett paid the \$10,000, and Ramsey's lawyer told the court last November that Ramsey was willing to allow Duckett and Black Diamond to remain in the home "in an effort to collect a substantial debt owed by Mr. Duckett." Duckett said he is still living in the home and the dispute has been resolved.

"Anybody who's doing business understands that we have our ups and downs," Duckett said, insisting that the down periods are over. "What we need to focus on is what Black Diamond is bringing to the city. Because I have those struggles I'm able to bring this to the city now. My company is at a point now where we're able to do these things."