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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

ATWATER MAN ARRESTED ON FRAUD AND FORGERY CHARGES

Investigators from the Merced County District Attorney's Office arrested Robert Anthony Ceccarelli, 32, of Atwater Wednesday on charges relating to fraudulent real estate transactions totaling over one million dollars. The arrest culminates a lengthy investigation that involved multiple victims, according to Deputy District Attorney Mark Bacciarini.

According to Bacciarini, Ceccarelli promised his victims substantial returns on short-term real estate investments. Instead, he took the money and used it to support a lavish lifestyle involving expensive cars and frequent trips to casinos and resort areas. Ceccarelli also diverted some of his victim's money into his own personal investments.

The fraud came to light when Ceccarelli wrote over a million dollars in bad checks to his victims. Investigation revealed that Ceccarelli also forged the signatures of local attorneys, using their letterhead to communicate with the investors. The forged correspondence assured the victims that their investments were safe, Bacciarini said. Additional forgeries included the victim's signatures on escrow documents, directing unauthorized disbursements of cash to Ceccarelli.

"This is one of the most significant real estate fraud schemes we have seen in Merced County. Several of the victims lost hundreds of thousands of dollars, with little hope of ever seeing their money returned," Bacciarini said.

Ceccarelli's arrest followed service of search and arrest warrants at his home in Atwater. He remains in custody in the Merced County Jail, with bail set at \$1,500,000. Supervising District Attorney Investigator Wayne Hutton headed the investigation, which is ongoing. Any other victims of Ceccarelli's fraud are asked to contact Investigator Hutton at 385-7383.