

A sheriff's sale steal

Friday, August 25, 2006

Savvy car shoppers should take a ride by the Union County Sheriff's Office. That's where Sheriff Ralph Froehlich's stepson recently walked away from a department auction with three luxury cars worth more than \$100,000 -- for all of \$300.

Union County officials insist the sheriff's sale that led to this eye-popping bargain was done strictly according to law. Maybe so, but the law in this case needs a tune-up. The only public advertisement of the sale was a notice posted in the sheriff's office, hardly sufficient to produce a meaningful number of bidders.

The sheriff's auction was the culmination of a tangled legal mess in which the sheriff's stepson won \$142,000-plus in civil fraud damages against Hillside Auto Center because the dealer didn't properly disclose a prior radio problem on a used car he bought. The dealership failed to post bond while it appealed, so the sheriff's office seized a BMW, a Porsche and a Volvo for auction to satisfy the judgment.

That's routine. What wasn't routine is what happened next. The auction attracted just two bidders: Hillside and one other car retailer. Hillside had the winning bid but didn't come with cash or a certified check, as required.

Then, oddly, the second bidder decided he didn't want the fancy autos after all, and the sheriff's stepson (himself a sheriff's officer) got the cars for an astounding \$300 default bid.

State law should be changed to require notice of sheriff's asset sales to be put on county sheriff Web sites as well as advertised in local papers, as is done with real estate foreclosures.

More publicity will draw more bidders. And that will make it more unlikely that three luxury cars worth more than \$100,000 can be sold for the price of a muffler.