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Warrant issued for owner of Palm Harbor sweepstakes cafe



Peter Jamison, Times Staff Writer

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The Pinellas County Sheriff's Office has issued an arrest warrant for the owner of an Internet cafe in Palm Harbor that detectives say was a front for an illegal gambling parlor.

Megan Crisante, 23, faces 45 misdemeanor counts of possession of coin-operated devices and one felony count of operating a gambling establishment at her Palm Harbor Internet Cafe, Sheriff Bob Gualtieri said.

His pursuit of Crisante is likely to set off further skirmishing in the statewide controversy over Internet "sweepstakes cafes," whose legality has been hotly debated among law enforcement authorities and legislators.

Crisante, whom sheriff's deputies believe to be a resident of Sanford, was a particularly outspoken advocate for her industry, challenging the sheriff's authority to investigate her business in federal court and asserting detectives used dubious methods to obtain a search warrant in her case. She also is the daughter of an Orlando woman who fought a similar charge before a jury in Marion County in 2010 — and won.

"We're very, very frustrated by this," said Kelly Mathis, Crisante's attorney, adding that he had not heard about the arrest warrant until informed of it by a reporter. "Obviously, the Sheriff's Office and the state attorney are completely ignoring the sweepstakes laws in doing this. It appears that what we have is an investigation seeking a preconceived result."

Mathis said Crisante would turn herself in to authorities as soon as possible. At present, he said, "I'm not sure where she is." Pinellas deputies are seeking Crisante with the help of the Seminole County Sheriff's Office, Gualtieri said.

Sweepstakes cafes like Palm Harbor Internet Cafe sell their customers phone cards that come with "points" used to play slot machine-style computer games on site, with the promise of potential cash winnings.

Cafe owners say their businesses are protected under a Florida law permitting sweepstakes that offer prizes to promote a product — in this case, the phone cards.

But authorities say this setup is a fairly transparent ruse for gambling in the digital age.

"We've had gambling laws that have been on the books here in the state of Florida for many years," Gualtieri said. "We have technology that has come into play that has provided an argument to defense lawyers and those who want to exploit a loophole."

On Tuesday, U.S. District Court Judge Elizabeth Kovachevich affirmed an earlier magistrate judge's decision that Gualtieri has the authority to investigate the cafes, rejecting Crisante's argument that her business, as a provider of Internet services, was protected under the First Amendment.

"The state of Florida is merely investigating a potential violation of its gambling laws," Kovachevich wrote in her order.

The cafes have their supporters. In January, a state Senate committee voted to allow the cafes to continue operating with new regulations. Gov. Rick Scott, with the backing of many in the law enforcement community, has said the cafes should be shut down.

Sheriff's deputies raided Crisante's Palm Harbor store and at least two others in July, shutting them down and confiscating 198 computers and \$20,000 in cash. Of the computers that were found at Crisante's cafe, Gualtieri said, there were 45 running the alleged gambling software and 39 others, recovered from storage boxes, that did not have the software.

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