

Sex sting nets conviction Jury recommends 5 years for man led to believe officer was 14-year-old.

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After days of sexually charged e-mailing, an engineer from Fenton drove to a park in Maryland Heights for a lunch-hour rendezvous that did not go well for him.

Jason Baxter was surrounded by six Maryland Heights police officers, indicted for attempted child enticement and convicted Wednesday night by jurors who recommended five years in prison.

His was the first such case taken to trial in St. Louis County, possibly the state, under a 2006 zero-tolerance law tailored to do two things: It allows prosecution even if the "child" is a masquerading police officer, and it sets a minimum penalty of five years with no parole, probation or suspended sentence.

In the past, convictions for such crimes often resulted in probation or short jail terms if there was no sexual contact.

Officer Erica Stough, 31, snared Baxter in August 2006 by pretending to be a 14-year-old in a sex-oriented Internet chat room. The law bars adults from luring anyone under 15 over the Internet.

Prosecutor Dave Pisarkiewicz and defense attorney **Bret Rich** agreed in this week's three-day trial that the messages themselves - no matter how intimate - were not crimes. But the prosecution said going to the meeting was.

Pisarkiewicz told the jury, "The only reason it was not completed, thankfully, is it was not a 14-year-old girl at the other end of all those e-mails."

But Rich said there would have been no case if police had not "solicited and encouraged him to commit a crime by meeting her." The lawyer said the officer suggested 19 times that his client meet her. Rich complained, "She manipulated the whole thing masterfully."

Evidence the jury saw included an unsolicited video Baxter e-mailed of himself masturbating. Based on that, Baxter also was convicted by the jury of the misdemeanor of attempting to furnish pornographic material to a minor, for which it recommended 10 days in jail.

Baxter, 29, the married father of two, testified that he was bored with his engineering job in Olivette and unhappy at home, so he turned to Internet sex chat rooms using his company computer.

He testified that he was trying to break off the online relationship and never intended to have sex with the teen. He said he sent the video to disgust her so she would end their conversations.

When she replied matter-of-factly to it, he said, he became convinced she was not a minor, so he went to the park the next day to satisfy his curiosity.

Baxter reluctantly agreed under cross-examination that he could have just blocked her e-mails or shut off his computer.

The prosecutor emphasized that Baxter sent the video to what he thought was a 14-year-old virgin living with her parents and 15-year-old brother.

Judge David Lee Vincent III set sentencing for March 28 and will decide next week on Baxter's request to be freed on bond until then.

Maryland Heights police Detective Capt. Scott Will said Baxter's arrest was the first of 50 made by his Internet Crimes Against Children unit since the law took effect.