



# **BCPO News**

**Scott A. Coffina, Prosecutor**



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## **Riverside Watch Case Project Developer Pleads Guilty to Forgery, Computer Related Crimes**

Burlington County Prosecutor Scott Coffina announced that a New York developer who purchased a historic Riverside commercial building to create luxury apartments in the seven-story landmark has pled guilty to using the credentials of a potential subcontractor to fraudulently gain approval for electrical permits from the township construction office.

Under an agreement with the Prosecutor's Office, Raphael S. Weiss, 61, of Brooklyn, pled guilty to Computer Related Activity (Second Degree) and Forgery (Third Degree) in exchange for a suspended five-year sentence.

The plea was entered yesterday in Superior Court before the Hon. Philip E. Haines, J.S.C., who scheduled sentencing for March 23. Leading up to that proceeding, Weiss's attorney and Riverside officials have agreed to work together for Weiss to surrender the property to another developer, and to ensure all liens have been satisfied.

"We are pleased that the defendant has accepted responsibility for his crimes and more importantly, that Riverside soon will be able to move forward with this project with a responsible developer," Prosecutor Coffina said. "We know how important the Keystone Watch Case Co. is to Riverside's past, present and future, and look forward to seeing this beautiful building brought back to life, and the positive impact it will have on this community."

The investigation began in 2020 after a contractor who was negotiating with Weiss to be the electrician of record on the Keystone Watch Case Co. building redevelopment project noticed that electrical work had begun at the North Pavilion Avenue site, even though no formal agreement had been finalized and he had not applied for any permits.

After being denied access to the construction site by Weiss, the electrician went to the Township construction office and was told that 36 permits had already been issued in his name and in the name of his business for work to be done at the property.

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Further examination revealed that the electrician's signature had been forged on the permits, which were applied for by Weiss, and a counterfeit version of the contractor's state-issued embossing seal had been used to make an imprint.

The investigation revealed that Weiss initiated the scheme as a way to reduce construction costs by fraudulently utilizing the credentials of the licensed electrician to obtain the necessary permits, then hiring unlicensed, unqualified laborers to complete the work at a much less expensive rate.

Not only was the action illegal, but it also jeopardized the safety of the project, as demonstrated by the fact that the electrical work completed after the fraudulent permits were obtained failed to pass inspection.

The Keystone Watch Case Co. building was constructed in 1908 and manufactured gold cases for watches. The company employed more than 1,000 employees in 1918, making it the largest watch case manufacturer in the world. The business was treasured as a strong engine in the local economy, with many employees living close enough to walk to work.

The company closed in 1956, and the building was placed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1977. It was purchased in 2016 by Brooklyn-based SimShabs Capital Partners LTD, of which Weiss is owner and president.

The plans submitted by Weiss to Riverside Township indicated that the iconic landmark, which has a prominent, highly visible clock tower rising above the roofline, would be converted into 64 luxury apartments.

Weiss is being prosecuted by Assistant Prosecutor Joseph Remy, supervisor of the BCPO Financial Crimes Unit, and Assistant Prosecutor Andrew McDonnell, supervisor of the BCPO Insurance Fraud Unit.

The investigation was conducted by detectives from the BCPO Financial Crimes Unit and the Riverside Township Police Department. The lead investigators are BCPO Detective Nicholas Schieber and Riverside Lt. Louis Fisher.

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