

Ex-county official pleads guilty to child molestation

BY DAVID L. BARBER
Free Press Special Writer

WHITE CLOUD — Longtime Mecosta County Commissioner Ray Christiansen, 71, pleaded guilty Monday to molesting children.

Under the terms of the plea agreement made before Newaygo County Circuit Judge Terrence Thomas, Christiansen cannot be sentenced to more than one year in jail.

His head bowed and hands folded behind his back, Christiansen pleaded guilty to one count of second degree criminal sexual conduct and one count of assault with intent to commit criminal sexual conduct.

Also as part of the plea agreement, Christiansen cannot be charged with similar crimes should other victims come forward.

Christiansen, who had served nine terms, was scheduled to stand trial in April for molesting four young girls. He resigned from the commission in December.

Larry Burdick, a special prosecutor

assigned to handle the case, said two more girls came forward recently to make similar accusations.

Because of Christiansen's political influence and his commission management position over various Mecosta County offices, the case was turned over to Burdick, who is the prosecutor of Isabella County.

Mecosta County Prosecutor James Samuels and 77th District Court Judge George VanKula disqualified themselves from the case, both citing potential conflicts of interest.

According to court records, one of the incidents Christiansen pleaded guilty to occurred on his southeastern Mecosta County farm on Sept. 13, 1991.

Christiansen remains free on \$2,000 bond. As part of the bond agreement, Thomas instructed him "not to be in the presence" of any child under the age of 18.

Christiansen could have been sentenced to up to 15 years in prison. He is expected to be sentenced in Newaygo County Circuit Court in about a month.

