

Prosecutors allege \$572,020 burglary at Ventura County Fair involved an insider



Four men pleaded not guilty Monday to charges in an August burglary of more than \$500,000 from the Ventura County Fair. ANTHONY PLASCENCIA/THE STAR



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Key Points

- The four suspects, from Los Angeles County, were arrested Thursday.
- Each man pleaded not guilty during their arraignment Monday.

The break-in and theft of \$572,020 at the Ventura County Fair in August revolved around an insider who worked at the fairgrounds for the company that processed cash receipts, prosecutors alleged Monday.

At an arraignment in Ventura, Ventura County Senior Deputy District Attorney Marc Leventhal said Alexander Piceno, 28, of Baldwin Park, was employed by a company that contracted with the beachside fairgrounds in Ventura. Leventhal alleged Piceno conspired in the early-morning burglary during the heart of the 12-day fair by unlocking a door to a fair building and helping unlock a safe so two men, Rafael Morales and Jesus Rios, could take the money.

Prosecutors accuse a fourth man, Carlos Alberto Aranda, 44, of Los Angeles, of being the lookout and driver.

All four men were arrested on Thursday in an operation announced by the California Highway Patrol and the Ventura County District Attorney's Office. They each pleaded not guilty on Monday. They were charged with burglary, grand theft, theft of public money and conspiracy.

Read more: [4 arrested in Ventura County Fairgrounds burglary case; \\$518K stolen](#)

Ventura County Superior Court Judge Nancy L. Ayers set bail for each man at \$500,000 and set preliminary hearings for March 17.

All of the men are from Los Angeles County with Morales, 56, living in La Puente and Rios, 55, residing in El Monte. All appeared virtually during the arraignment from Ventura County jail facilities.

Fair officials have said the early morning theft involved gate receipts as well as money from fair parking and the carnival. During the fair, the money is prepared for deposit each night and then picked up by an armored car in the morning before gates open. Officials said the money was not insured.

Fairgrounds CEO Stacy Rianda said in October there was video of the break-in from security cameras. After more than six months of investigation, California Highway Patrol officials said they served four search warrants simultaneously and then made the arrests.

On Monday, Ayers described the crime as sophisticated and thoroughly planned. A felony complaint from the district attorney's office alleged Piceno's insider role was designed to allow for access into the building and then the safe without signs of forced entry. Leventhal said Morales, Rios and Aranda have several previous convictions. He said Morales and Rios have partnered on several crimes in California and Nevada.

The company that allegedly employed Piceno was not named in Monday's hearing or in the felony complaint.

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