

Car deal by telephone goes bad

Dear Attorney General Kline: Recently I made a deal over the phone to buy a used car from a man. We agreed on a price, he faxed me a notarized contract of sale and made arrangements for the delivery of the car.

I wired him \$500 earnest money but I have not been able to reach him since then. Is there anything I can do to get my money back?

Dear Kansas Consumer:

Unfortunately, it is very unlikely that your money can be retrieved.

Sending money by wire has advantages in several situations but you must remember it is like handing over cash and there are fewer safeguards, especially when you're buying something basically sight unseen from a person you do not know personally.

Using a check or credit card is much more secure when making purchases of any kind.

There are several things to always



Phill Kline

• Consumer Corner

keep in mind when you decide to buy a car. Ask friends and family to help you select a reputable dealership. Be sure to always get all details about the vehicle and the sale in writing.

It's also a good idea not to buy on impulse — take the time to fully understand all terms of the sale.

Ask the owner or dealer for complete vehicle and title histories, have the vehicle inspected by a trusted mechanic of your choice, and question previous owners about the vehicle and the extent of any prior damage or mechanical problems. Also, don't forget to inspect the vehicle to determine the actual

mileage.

If you're offered extended warranties, examine them carefully and remember they are optional, not mandatory.

Finally, remember that it is always sound advice to know the company or, in this case, individual you're doing business with before parting with any of your hard earned money.

Editor's note: Attorney General Phill Kline offers this public service to help people avoid becoming victims of consumer fraud. Although some of the details have been changed, the cases appearing in this column are based on actual complaints or questions.

For information or to file a complaint, write Attorney General Phill Kline, Consumer Protection Division, 120 SW 10th Ave., 2nd Floor, Topeka, Kan. 66612, or call the toll-free Consumer Hotline, 1-800-432-2310.

Disaster status okayed in 32 counties

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Bush declared disaster status on Wednesday for 32 Kansas counties hardest hit by last month's ice storm that left hundreds of thousands of people without electrical power.

Bush acted on the request from Gov. Kathleen Sebelius, who sought the federal assistance for the counties that were among the 56 for which she declared a disaster emergency on Jan. 4.

The counties are Anderson, Atchison, Barber, Butler, Chase, Chautauqua, Clark, Coffey, Comanche, Cowley, Crawford, Douglas, Elk, Franklin, Greenwood, Harper, Harvey, Jefferson, Kingman, Lyon, Marion, Morris, Osage, Pratt, Reno, Rice, Sedgwick, Shawnee, Sumner, Wabaunsee, Woodson and Wyandotte.

The president's declaration covers the period from Jan. 4-6. It makes federal funds available, on a cost-sharing basis, to the state, local governments and some non-

profit organizations within the counties for emergency work and the repair and replacement of facilities damaged by the storm. It includes the cost for dealing with such things as downed power lines and poles, and debris removal.

In the state's request, it estimated eligible damage in the affected counties at \$39 million.

The declaration provides eligibility for payment of 75 percent of the approved cost for emergency work and restoration of damaged facilities.

Damage from the storm was not enough to warrant seeking federal aid for individuals.

"I am pleased we have received this declaration for our communities hit so hard by January's storms," Sebelius said in a statement. "Federal assistance will go a long way towards helping the communities impacted by this storm, and I want to thank the president for this action."

The Wichita area was especially

hard hit by power outages related to the storm. The state's largest utility, Topeka-based Westar Energy Inc., said about one-third of its customers lost power, some more than once, and some for up to 10 days.

Last month Westar, estimated its cost for restoring electrical service to the estimated 211,000 customers who lost power at between \$38 million and \$42 million.

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