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Attorney General Spitzer today announced a lawsuit against a Seneca County garage operator alleged to have engaged in fraudulent billing for repairs on county-owned vehicles.

The lawsuit against John T. Studwell, owner and operator of Preferred Auto in Waterloo, seeks restitution and damages for work that was never done, for excessive mark-ups for parts and labor, and for billing for new parts when used parts were installed on county vehicles, including patrol cars used by the county sheriff's department.

"This company simply did not fulfill the high standards that are expected by those selected to provide service for official vehicles," Spitzer said.

Studwell held a contract to provide maintenance and repairs on county vehicles between 2001 and 2004. Throughout that time, county employees lodged complaints about Preferred Auto's inadequate services, including that the garage failed to perform routine maintenance, including vehicle inspections, and that, as a result, county vehicles experienced numerous mechanical problems.

In 2005, the Seneca County Attorney's Office referred the matter to the Attorney General's Public Integrity Unit. After conducting its own investigation, the unit filed a lawsuit, alleging that Preferred Auto engaged in repeated and persistent fraud, deceptive business practices and breach of contract.

Spitzer thanked Seneca County Attorney Steven J. Getman and the New York State Police for their assistance in the investigation of this case.

The case is being handled by Assistant Attorney General Alvin Bragg, under the supervision of Carrie H. Cohen, Assistant Attorney General in Charge of the Public Integrity Unit. The case was investigated by Senior Investigator Curtiss C. Smith of the Investigations Bureau.

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