

FREEHOLD — A Somerset County man who authorities say solicited contributions for fake charities then used some of the money to pay off gambling debts was sentenced Friday afternoon to five years in state prison.

Christopher Elia, 45, of Warren Township, did not speak at his sentencing before state State Superior Court Judge Francis P. DeStefano, sitting in Freehold.

When Elia pleaded guilty in April, he admitted to third-degree failure to pay taxes, and the theft of more than \$75,000, a second-degree offense.

When he was arrested in May 2010, authorities said he solicited more than \$596,000 in contributions — mostly from local, small business owners — for phony charities, then used the money to pay personal expenses and gambling debts. Authorities say victims thought they were donating to organizations that helped local police officers, firefighters and disabled veterans.

In some cases, Elia used names of real charities to solicit contributions, and other times he used names similar to actual charities, authorities said.

When he was taken into custody in 2010, he was free on \$100,000 bond from a November 2009 arrest on charges that included promoting gambling.

That charge was among those dismissed Friday as part of the plea agreement.

Elia, who was represented by Thomas Ashley, has almost four months of credit for time he spent in jail while awaiting the disposition of the case.

Assistant Monmouth County Prosecutor Christopher Matthews handled the case for the state.

This has been a joint case with the Monmouth County Prosecutor's Office and the Office of Criminal Investigation since October 2009 and was investigated by Auditor Debra Lewaine.