

“Who Knew What When?”

HATTIESBURG – The question posed in the title of this report above is the very one posed to USM faculty senate president Timothy Rehner at the faculty senate’s 2-Dec-2011 meeting. That Watergate-*esque* question refers, of course, to the recent Tabletgate scandal that has been covered extensively by USMNEWS.net and many other media outlets. The question was very appropriate, given the circumstances of the situation that were discovered by Rehner and were being passed along to USM faculty senators. Inserted below is the timeline of events that Rehner provided the senate body on 2-Dec-2011:

- Months leading up to Summer 2011 USM worked with a private donor to develop a program to provide several hundred Samsung Galaxy Tab devices to honors college students/faculty and others. USM officials moved to buy the devices from Samsung *before the private money was secured*. After the order was placed, the private donor bailed on the program, leaving USM with the nearly \$0.5 million invoice. USM officials decided not to cancel the order, but to instead move forward with the program. The money needed to purchase the devices was taken from pots budgeted for BlackBoard upgrades and other purposes. Because there had been a private donor to fund the program, no bids were solicited. When USM officials decided to fund the program, the invoices were split so as to avoid contracting requirements that high-level officials approve the purchase.
- Aug-2011 USM officials, including USM president Martha Saunders, delivered the Samsung tablets, *to much fanfare*, to several hundred USM students and faculty. One tablet was even sent to Hank Bounds, the Mississippi IHL commissioner. Bounds’ tablet was returned to USM. Somewhere around this point, “an internal audit was turned on.”
- 11-Nov-2011 On this Friday, USM chief information officer Homer Coffman was placed on administrative leave by the Martha Saunders administration. Coffman’s signature appeared on the paperwork required to purchase the devices
- 16-Nov-2011 USM provost Robert Lyman resigned his administrative post effectively immediately. Saunders cited “personal reasons” for Lyman’s resignation. Lyman cited the fact that his signature was also on paperwork involved in the purchase, and therefore Coffman should not be the only USM administrator to fall. USM vice president for research Denis Wiesenberg was named interim provost.
- 17-Nov-2011 Saunders travelled to the IHL offices in Jackson, a trip she described to Rehner as “going to the woodshed.” Saunders attempted to mitigate the human cost of the Tabletgate scandal, only to be told by IHL officials that administrative leave had to be issued to three USM administrators. As Rehner put it, *Saunders had a different plan, but the IHL insisted that heads had to roll*.
- 18-Nov-2011 A faculty senate subcommittee met with Saunders to discuss the Tabletgate situation. Saunders informed them that USM public relations officials were working on a press release notifying the media that Lyman, Coffman and USM procurement and contract services director Mike Herndon were being placed on administrative leave. As Rehner and other faculty senators were leaving this particular meeting, USM vice president for administrative affairs Russ Willis was escorting Herndon into the AKL Administration Building, presumably to get the bad news from Saunders

that he was vacating his administrative position at USM. The USM presser was released late that afternoon, and the media was reporting on it by that evening.

Clearly, the “who knew what when?” question is applicable here. As it turns out, Coffman was placed on administrative leave several days before Tabletgate became public, at which point (when word of the scandal broke) many were speculating that Coffman might resign his post as CIO at USM. And, even though Lyman’s resignation was related to Tabletgate, Saunders informed the media that he was stepping down as provost for personal reasons, a position she has yet to publicly refute, even though Lyman is among the three USM officials who have been placed on administrative leave by the IHL.

Rehner reported to the faculty senate that there is “a sense of sadness” around the USM campus that is “quite palpable” given the “loss of good people.” Rehner also reported to the senate that there is now reason to worry about iTech and procurements, and that he (Rehner) is troubled that some USM officials seem to now be “piling on [Homer Coffman],” saying that he (Coffman) was never the right man for the CIO position – a position he (Coffman) held for many years. Rehner supported a floor suggestion that the faculty senate hold an emergency meeting on 9-Dec-2011 in order to get information directly from Saunders.

Finally, sources are telling USMNEWS.net that Coffman will likely never be seen again as part of the USM family. They also point out that Saunders appears to have toyed with the idea of covering up much of what took place during this Tabletgate situation, only to be rebuffed by Bounds and the IHL. Rehner reported that, even at the 18-Nov-2011 meeting with Saunders, the USM president (Saunders) continued to state that Lyman had resigned for personal reasons. To sources at least, this is further evidence that Saunders indeed “had a different plan,” just as Rehner reported to the faculty senate on 2-Dec-2011.