

Heavy Wait

USM COMMUNITY SEEKING RESOLUTION TO TABLETGATE

Thanks to Ed Kemp's 1-Feb-2012 [report for *The Hattiesburg American*](#), the USM community has learned that 135 of the Samsung Galaxy Tabs involved in the USM [Tabletgate scandal](#) are sitting in storage because that number of USM students decided to return the devices after they were told by the Martha Saunders administration that the devices belonged to USM, not them. The one-time gifts to the students were rescinded after Mississippi officials learned that about \$440,000 in taxpayer funds were used by the Saunders administration in providing the gifts (to private parties). Through interviews, like that with new USM chief information officer David Silman, Kemp learned not only that (1) 170 Samsung tablets are in storage, and (2) 135 of those were returned by their original recipients, he also discovered that the remaining 35 tablets were never distributed to anyone, and have been stored since Aug-2011, when the Samsung program began. That means that about \$20,000 (of the \$440,000) in taxpayer funds were spent on technology that has yet to see the light of day. Not only that, the State of Mississippi (USM) is now "underwater" with these devices, given the rapid technological advancements in the world of electronics.

The USM Tabletgate scandal was enough to [cost the jobs](#) of Silman's predecessor, Homer Coffman, and former USM director of procurements/contracts, Mike Herndon. In addition to these two, former USM provost Robert Lyman surrendered his administrative post as a result of his participation in Tabletgate. Lyman, with the

support of Saunders, is currently working to hang on to his tenured professor post in USM's psychology department. The Mississippi IHL Board is reportedly working against such an outcome. Now, according to Kemp, the IHL Board is also investigating how student technology fees, like the \$65 student fee for *i*Tech services at USM, are being spent by all of Mississippi's public universities, given that *i*Tech was the USM bureau within which the *spare* \$400,000+ was found "on short notice." Thus, USM's Tabletgate now threatens to spill over into the state's public university system as a whole, perhaps one day to spawn "_gates" of other sorts. As explained by Kemp, this ominous picture was painted by Denis Wiesenburg, the recently-appointed interim provost at USM who replaced Lyman back in the fall of 2011. Lyman is currently on the USM faculty, as stated earlier, yet he is not teaching any courses for the institution during spring semester 2012. According to Kemp's interview with USM's chief communications officer Jim Coll, Lyman is currently "re-tool[ing] in preparation for his return to the classroom," a concept sources tell USMNEWS.net is likely considered laughable by many among the rank-and-file USM faculty.

In describing the number of devices in storage, Kemp reminds the USM community that more than 700 devices (*closer to 800 to be more precise*) were originally purchased for students, *faculty* and *staff members*. That revelation supports the earlier USMNEWS.net report linked above, which also provides sources'

view that the extent to which the tablet program was used as a political favors program may never be known. Kemp's conversation with USM student Cade Varnado of the Honors College also shines light on the logic behind students' desire to return the Samsung technology once the Saunders administration rescinded the gifts. As Varnado explained, students were afraid that, after the tablets were tagged as USM property, they would be "on the hook" for tablets that may be damaged or lost (or stolen). As Varnado and other students seem to understand, being on a \$580 hook (USM's expense) for devices that may now be worth only \$225-\$400 – hence the "underwater" label -- is a "fail" when it comes to financial management 101. Now,

USM officials are left wondering what to do with 170 Samsung devices that remain in storage – a situation that Wiesenburg describes as "*probably* not a good" one (emphasis added). However, Wiesenburg also adds that any decision on how to use the stored devices must ultimately be made by Saunders, given that she has "... taken a lot of heat over the issue." Source counter by adding that "heat" is what Coffman and Herndon experienced in losing their jobs as a result of Tabletgate. Saunders, on the other hand, still seems to be riding high, at least to sources. Meanwhile, the USM community waits under the weight of more bad press for the 100-year old institution.