

“It's a violation of state law to use tax-funded resources for personal gain.”



October 17, 2008

Miss. St. leader liable

By VALERIE WELLS

Mississippi State University employees planted 13 magnolia trees at the Rankin County home of Tom Meredith, commissioner of higher education, and the state is holding the interim president of MSU accountable.

State Auditor Stacey Pickering issued a demand to MSU interim President Vance Watson for \$12,333 for landscaping work performed on Meredith's property.

Watson, a candidate for the presidency of Mississippi State, paid that on Wednesday. It will be returned to Mississippi State.

Meredith inquired about paying for the service, which was done on March 22, 2007, and attempted to pay for it, but no payment was made, said Pickering, during a press conference at the College Board meeting Thursday at the University of Southern Mississippi.

The state auditor's office expedited the investigation so that the College Board could continue with the search for a new Mississippi State president.

Meredith was not found at fault, Pickering said, because he did not have authority over the personnel, equipment or funds used.

In a statement, Meredith said: "I am pleased this incident has concluded and that I have been exonerated by the state auditor's office."

Watson said in a statement he was ready for the university to move forward.

"We have all been quite concerned about this issue and are glad to have some closure," Southern Miss President Martha Saunders said Thursday.

Senate Universities Chairman Doug Davis, R-Hernando, was more harsh, saying Meredith and Watson should step down.

"What the state auditors revealed today is that both men showed a lapse of judgment, and I don't see how they can continue in their positions," Davis said.

Meredith has been on paid leave since Sept. 27 and was not present at the College Board meetings this week.

College Board President Amy Whitten said Meredith will remain on leave. The board won't meet again until mid-November.

Pickering said the \$12,333 was a civil demand including \$6,347 in misused funds, more than \$1,200 in accrued interest and more than \$4,000 in investigative costs.

The incident started in January 2007 when Mississippi State Cooperative Extension Agents visited Meredith's property for an evaluation. Any resident of Mississippi can have Cooperative Extension Agents visit property to suggest types of trees to plant or other landscaping ideas.

What was unusual in this case was that Mississippi State purchased the trees and used its personnel and equipment to do the landscaping.

None of the equipment was marked, Pickering said. The equipment included two F-150 pickup trucks, a trailer and a tractor. Pickering said the equipment was new and that it wasn't clear if not marking it was intentional.

It's a violation of state law to use tax-funded resources for personal gain.

The state auditor's office conducts investigations into potential abuse of public funds and usually turns over a report of any abuses to the district attorney's office.

Pickering said the investigation was turned over to the Oktibbeha County district attorney.

Meredith, who makes \$366,350 a year as commissioner, was hired in 2005.

From: <http://www.hattiesburgamerican.com/article/20081017/NEWS01/810170303/-1/NEWSFRONT2>

The portion of this story above in bold was made so for emphasis. Would "tax-funded resources" include a university-supplied telephone, fax, computer and email capabilities, printers and copiers, and office space? Would consulting income from working as a paid expert for various law firms be considered "personal gain"? What if some of this consulting is done during normal business hours from a chairman's university office while he is getting paid by tax dollars to be a chairman and not a consultant? Even if the university attorney "approved" this, does it matter? Can he legally approve it? This is what George Carter has done, and continues to do, from his office in the College of Business at USM. If he is taking personal leave time while he is doing this, he can prove it. Even if he is, which is highly doubtful, he is still using "state tax-funded resources for personal gain." As stated in the article above, that is illegal. Based on the law as stated, the state auditor's office needs to investigate George Carter for his consulting activities and see if his situation needs to be reported to the local district attorney's office.