

Saunders Gets Snarky with USM Student *Possibly (1) Admitted Legal Violation, or (2) Lied*

Things continue to spiral out of control on the USM campus in response to the Martha Saunders administration's decision to terminate the employment of 29 tenured/tenure-track faculty for the 2011-12 academic year. These terminations come from Saunders' response to a state-mandated \$15 million budget cut for FY 2012, which combined with the FY 2011 cut of \$10 million has led Saunders to deliver almost 50 pink slips to tenured/tenure-track USM faculty since summer of 2009. As Ed Kemp, the higher education reporter for *The Hattiesburg American*, describes in his 15-Sept-2010 [report](#), about 200 USM students assembled on 14-Sept-2010 to have questions about the budget cuts answered by USM's top brass, including Saunders. At one point during the SGA-hosted event, junior sociology major Henry Hirdes took the floor to ask about the airplane that "the university owns," and how much it would cost to get rid of it since USM is "not using it." Although USM vice president for student affairs Joe Paul was holding the microphone and was beginning address Hirdes' question, Saunders [took the microphone](#) from Paul and stated: "The university does not own an airplane. The university leases an airplane and in about two, two and one-half years when the lease is up, we'll certainly review the efficacy of that decision." Then, after explaining to Hirdes that the plane was leased in order to "maximize administrative time," she added: "I don't know why you're saying it's not in the air. It's in the air two or three times a week, so I think you may have to check your references on that one."¹



Photo of the USM student town hall meeting from *The Student Printz*.

As regular readers of USMNEWS.net are well aware, USMNEWS.net recently filed a Mississippi Open Records request for *all of the documents* pertaining to USM's use of the Beechcraft King Air since initiating its lease of the airplane from the USM Foundation. That request produced [a batch of documents](#) that revealed

¹ In the [account of the event](#) by *The Student Printz's* Ashley Ervin and Ashton Pittmann, Saunders is reported as saying that most Mississippi universities have planes, and that having one could be the difference in getting and not getting a \$1 million donation.

that USM officials (and others) used the plane a total of 30 times (round trips) during the first 17 months of the lease, and it did so at a cost of \$591,232.²

At 4.25 weeks per month, the first 17 months of the airplane lease consists of 72 total weeks. At two to three flights per week, which is Saunders' account to Hirdes, the USM plane should have taken anywhere from 144 to 216 total flights, as the table below indicates, over the first 17 months of the life of the lease.

Table 1 – *Saunders' Account vs. Open Records Request Regarding USM Plane's First 17 Months*

Saunders' Account of 2 Flights/week	Saunders' Account of 3 Flights/week	USM's Response to MS Open Records Act
144 total flights	216 total flights	30 total flights

It appears, then, that in getting snarky with Hirdes about the USM airplane, Saunders inadvertently admitted that she provided USMNEWS.net with only about 14% to 21% of the documentation on the *total* number of flights accounted for by Saunders' comment. Thus, if Saunders made an accurate statement to Hirdes, then USM's response to USMNEWS.net vis-à-vis use of the airplane did not fully comply with Mississippi law. However, if Saunders and USM fully complied with Mississippi law regarding records on usage of the plane, then she perhaps lied to Hirdes so that her controversial decision to lease the Beechcraft King Air would seem more sensible. As the data above indicate, the USM plane may travel only 0.4 times/week, and not the 2 or 3 times indicated by Saunders.

Clearly, this recent episode shows just how controversial the “planegate” episode has been for Saunders and her administration. What some are calling [the elephant in the room](#), “planegate” shows no signs of abating any time soon. Far from it – online readers of *The Hattiesburg American* have recently [been citing](#) Saunders' \$325,000 “boudoir makeover” as [another example](#) of her use of taxpayer dollars for personal gain. And unlike many university building projects, the boudoir renovation was funded from dollars taken “from university sources [i.e., the general fund],” rather than a centralized capital fund housed in Jackson, MS.³ In this way the boudoir renovation and the Beechcraft lease are in the same category.

² This figure comes to about \$417,000 on an annual basis, which is about 2.1 times the amount that USM provost Robert Lyman [informed the USM faculty senate](#) (in Dec-2009) that the plane would cost USM on an annual basis.

³ See the links included herein for the fine print regarding Saunders' \$325,000 boudoir renovation.