

Lee County notebook

Bigger billing for Lee fraud hotline

Lee County Clerk Linda Doggett has made it easier to report misdeeds by local political figures and government employees.

The official clerk's website now includes a bright red button titled Inspector General Hotline that provides a quick link to submit information about things that don't look right to investigators. It replaces a less visible, three-line link.

The website has long provided access for people who want to provide information about suspected wrong-doing and money-wasting. The Lee clerk's community affairs director, Rita Miller, said the website link was changed "about a month ago," and now appears "in larger font and the title changed to Inspector General Hotline for a more accurate reflection."

County clerk offices can audit county spending and have an inspector general responsible for preventing fraud, waste, abuse, financial mismanagement and ethical misconduct in government.

State agencies are required by law to have inspectors general, whose activities are coordinated by a chief inspector general, who is appointed, and can be fired at any time by the governor.

Whistleblower issues revived

A decision from the United States Court of Appeal opening the door to a jury trial on whistleblower claims made by former employee of the county Economic Development Office, means allegations from former employee Lisa Wagner are back in play.

The three-member panel says there is enough substance to Wagner's claims that a jury needs to hear the case.

Wagner was one of four fired employees who claim their cooperation in a county audit of the use of county economic development funds by VR Labs led to their dismissals. VR Labs, a health food manufacturer, burned through \$4.7 million in economic development money while failing to meet job creation guarantees.

U.S. District Court Judge Paul Magnuson threw the Wagner case out, accepting

the county's argument that the firing of Wagner was due to a reduction in staffing to close a county budget deficit. The other employees went to trial and won a \$1.3 million jury verdict.

The appeals court said the whistleblower complaint "produced sufficient evidence to support the finding that the County did not terminate her because of a need to reduce its expenditures."

The appeals decision also found that claims Glen Salyer, then an assistant to the county manager, "was aware" that Wagner participated in the audit, and that former economic development director James Moore "recommended terminating the employees who participated" are issues a jury should consider.

Concluding, the court ruled that a reasonable jury could find that "Wagner's audit participation was in fact the reason for her termination."

County Attorney Richard Wesch said the county would seek a rehearing of the appeals court decision.

20/20 supporters back at it

The group that banded together to lead the campaign in support of Lee County's 20/20 conservation program is getting active again, organizing to support purchase of more than 90 acres in northeastern Lee County.

The vote by a county advisory panel to recommend that the 20/20 program acquire the site near the Caloosahatchee River was close, and the pro-20/20 group is working to convince county commissioners to go through with the deal negotiated with the landowner.

Participants in "eYes on Conservation 20/20," formed by referendum supporters to carry on advocacy for the program, plan to raise their voices in support of the Alva land purchase.

Two of the members who voted against recommending the purchase said the price was too high. At \$2.7 million, the price is 16 percent less than the current owner paid for the land two years ago.

County commissioners are expected to make a decision next month.

State briefs

Florida chief wants sergeants fired for sex acts on the job

JUPITER - A South Florida police chief wants two sergeants fired after an investigation revealed they engaged in sex acts while on duty.

Jupiter Police Sgt. Amy Walling and Sgt. Jason VanSteenburgh were once a couple but allegedly parted months ago. An internal investigation revealed Walling performed a sex act on VanSteenburgh while he was on duty. She was off duty at the time. According to the report, she also sent him a partially nude photo of herself while wearing a town police uniform.

The Palm Beach Post reports VanSteenburgh sent her a partially nude photo while wearing a SWAT uniform. He was allegedly protecting the safety of a person whose life was in danger at the time.

Chief Frank J. Kitzerow recommended firing the two sergeants for conduct unbecoming an officer.

Man charged with setting aunt's house on fire

MIAMI - A South Florida man is facing arson charges after authorities say he threw a bucket of paint on his aunt and set the house on fire.

Miami-Dade police say Michael Rawlins was painting his aunt's driveway in December when he became angry because she allegedly refused to pay him. She told police she thought he had taken \$100 from her purse.

Rawlins threatened to burn down the house, threw a bucket of paint on her, then allegedly ran to the side of the house and set a cabinet on fire. WPLG reports the fire spread quickly and shattered a window, sending smoke throughout the house.

He escaped but was arrested late last week and charged with arson and battery on a person who is older than 65 years.

— Associated Press

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