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Prison chief quits amid scrutiny

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'Tennessean' raised questions about '04 harassment claim against White

State lawyer who investigated shredded her notes

By BRAD SCHRADE and CHRISTIAN BOTTORFF

Staff Writers

State Correction Commissioner Quenton White resigned yesterday amid mounting questions about a sexual harassment allegation against him, his handling of a sexual harassment case against his executive assistant and circumstances surrounding his relationship with a former subordinate.

Gov. Phil Bredesen also confirmed yesterday, after questions from The Tennessean, that White himself was the subject of a sexual harassment investigation in August 2004. The complaint was deemed unfounded, the governor said. However, that statement could not be independently confirmed last night, because the top lawyer for the state Personnel Department, who investigated the complaint, shredded her notes, and there was no written report on what she found.

It was the second time in a year that Personnel Department General Counsel Kae Carpenter shredded notes from a sexual harassment investigation of a high-ranking administration official.

That drew criticism last night from the top Republican in the state legislature.

"You should not be destroying documents. If it's not a coverup, it starts to look like one," Senate Republican Leader Ron Ramsey said.

State Democratic Chairman Bob Tuke said Ramsey was wrong and defended his party's governor.

"It's nonsense. It's good practice when such notes would implicate innocent people. It's done all the time," said Tuke, an attorney.

The other case in which Carpenter shredded notes involved a harassment allegation this spring against Bredesen's top lobbyist, Robert "Mack" Cooper, whom the governor then demoted. Administration officials have refused to provide any details about what happened in that case.

After that case Bredesen proposed changing the law to close public access to some records involving sexual harassment complaints. He said he wanted to protect the privacy of victims. Bredesen also said that sexual harassment was a problem in state government.

To examine the extent of that problem, The Tennessean asked the personnel department for copies of the files on the 10 most recent harassment cases it investigated.

When the files were received, three were empty. The state refused to provide any records in those cases, citing attorney-client privilege. An additional file contained only printouts of two e-mails that did not shed any light on the case.

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Last night, Personnel Department spokeswoman Lola Potter confirmed that one of those empty files involved the allegation against White. She provided the one document that was in the file, and which had not been previously revealed, a vaguely worded letter from the governor's lawyer Bob Cooper to Carpenter asking her to investigate an unspecified allegation against White.

Asked whether any of the other empty files involved complaints against top-ranking administration officials, Potter said she would not disclose anything more about those cases.

However, she said Carpenter and Nat Johnson, deputy commissioner of personnel, "said they cannot recall" any other complaints against high-ranking officials.

White, 45, who had headed the state's prison system since 2003, turned in his resignation yesterday to Bredesen, the man who hired him. Among the questions raised about White and his department in recent months:

- o A Tennessean story last month raised questions about the Correction Department's handling of a sexual harassment claim last September against Omaran Lee, an executive assistant to White. Lee was suspended for a day without pay for sexually harassing a secretary in the central office. White promoted Lee just six months later and gave him a pay raise.

- o The governor yesterday confirmed that White himself had a sexual harassment accusation against him in August 2004, weeks before the complaint against Lee. An investigation, Bredesen said, determined there was "no corroboration" and that the matter didn't play into White's resignation yesterday.

Andrea Conte, the governor's wife, brought the complaint to the governor's office's attention, he said.

- o The Tennessean also reported last month about a sexual harassment claim against a personnel manager in the Correction Department, Jay Jackson of La Vergne. The man was accused of making inappropriate remarks, including placing a flesh-colored pen near his groin and repeatedly asking a secretary to pull it. That matter is still under investigation.

- o Shortly after those reports, news accounts reported that White had had his driver's license suspended after failing to pay a speeding ticket he had received in Louisiana last year.

The Tennessean yesterday had found that White appeared to have driven his state-issued vehicle across Tennessee for months while his license was suspended, according to state fuel logs.

The newspaper also had found that his license had been suspended on two previous occasions. Once was for a speeding ticket he had received in April 2001, the same month that he stepped down from the Nashville U.S. attorney's post after the Bush administration took office.

- o White, whose wife filed for divorce in January, has a girlfriend, Kym Dukes, who was a subordinate of White's in the Correction Department. She transferred to the state Department of Education in October.

- o The Tennessean reported last Thursday that Lee, the former executive assistant, was Dukes' godson. White's spokeswoman Amanda Sluss had confirmed that Lee was Dukes' godson the day before the story was published, reaffirming that fact the next day.

But on Friday, Dukes denied that she was Lee's godmother, and Sluss backpedaled, saying she had been mistaken. White, who had previously refused several interview requests, also said on Friday that it was not true.

- o This past legislative session, lawmakers grilled White about several concerns with the prison system, including contraband being smuggled into the prisons and violence among its 17,000 adult inmates. There was criticism about lax punishment that White's administration doled out to guards accused of breaking the law.

- o An inmate at a Nashville prison was fatally stabbed and set on fire in April while working on cleaning detail with two other maximum security inmates. The inmates who were working with him are suspected in the attack. The fire was set using gasoline from a prison lawn mower, officials have said.

- o It has been no secret in the government that the administration had grown increasingly restless about White's management of the prison system. Bredesen yesterday said there had been some missed cost projections on building projects that concerned him.

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When asked by reporters later whether Bredesen had requested the resignation of his Cabinet member, whom it was well-known had been seeking to leave the administration for months, the governor said:

"I think in the end he felt that was the right thing to do and he provided me with the letter ... I think it was the right thing to do."

Deputy Correction Commissioner Gayle Ray will oversee the department until a permanent replacement is found. Ray served as Davidson County sheriff when Bredesen was Nashville's mayor.

Through a spokeswoman, White declined to comment yesterday. In his brief, three-paragraph resignation letter to Bredesen, he said:

"I feel that the recent events in the media have crippled my ability to serve in an effective manner. Notwithstanding this, I depart having grown by the experience and despite any allegations of improprieties to the character of my service, knowing that I have done nothing wrong."

White expressed great frustration and anger at a Tennessean reporter during phone conversation on Friday. The commissioner said the newspaper was on a "witch hunt." White did not directly answer questions about his relationship with Dukes. On one hand, he said he had never dated an employee, but when asked about whether he was dating Dukes when she transferred in October, he said: "What difference does it make?"

"I'm tired of it," White said. "I have not done anything to anybody, other than to try to run a d... department over here."

When asked yesterday whether the dating relationship was discussed with White, Bredesen said it may have been mentioned briefly and that the resignation was about a myriad of issues, not one item.

"I certainly have expressed before and will again today that I think having a relationship with someone who is a subordinate is a really bad judgment item," Bredesen said.

"I would certainly expect my commissioners not to do that sort of thing. That was not a specific item discussed. It may have been mentioned for 15 seconds or something, but that certainly was not by itself the cause of what went on here."

White's departure from the administration was not a complete surprise. In May, Bredesen helped White try to find another job. The commissioner had applied for the vacant president post of Southern University in Louisiana, his alma mater. Bredesen sent a letter of recommendation to Louisiana Gov. Kathleen Blanco. He offered to discuss White's tenure overseeing the state's 15 prisons.

It wasn't clear last night whether White was still in the running for the post. University officials did not return calls seeking comment.

The end came when Bredesen called in his prison chief yesterday morning for a sit-down.

Alongside Bredesen in the governor's Capitol office was his top strategist and confidant, Deputy Gov. Dave Cooley. White was alone.

By the end of the 25-minute meeting, the commissioner had gotten the message from the administration. There was little choice but to step down.

Later on, Bredesen, held back discussing many of the details.

"Quenton has resigned," Bredesen said. "And again, I don't particularly want to stand here and sort of pick over the bones." n

Staff writer Trent Seibert contributed to this report.

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Quenton I. White

Hometown: Ninth of 10 children born to a farming couple in Alexandria, La.

Personal: Getting divorced; two children.

Education: Undergraduate and law degrees from Southern University in Baton Rouge, La.

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Jobs: After law school, was an attorney for the U.S. Army; attorney and adviser for the U.S. Federal Service Impasse Panel, 1990-1992; assistant public defender in Metro, 1992-94; executive director, nonprofit group 100 Black Men of Middle Tennessee, 1995-2000; U.S. attorney for Middle Tennessee for four months in 2000-2001; state correction commissioner, 2003-2005.

SOURCES: Tennessean archives; Associated Press

White's tickets

State Correction Commissioner Quenton White, who resigned yesterday, drove across Tennessee in his state-issued vehicle while his driver's license was suspended, state documents show.

White's car, a black 2003 Chevrolet Impala sedan, was filled up with gas several times at state-run gas pumps on dates in which his license was under suspension for unpaid speeding tickets, according to state records.

In bold type are dates on which White received tickets, or had his license suspended or reinstated.

2004

Sept. 6 -- White given speeding ticket in Bartow County, Ga., that he later fails to pay.

Oct. 28 -- White receives speeding ticket in Columbia, La., that he later fails to pay.

2005

Jan. 24 -- White's license suspended for the Georgia ticket.

Jan. 28, Feb. 1, Feb. 5 -- White's car refueled in Nashville.

Feb. 13 -- White's car refueled in Memphis.

Feb. 18 -- White's license reinstated for the Georgia ticket.

March 21 -- White's license suspended for the Louisiana ticket.

March 23, March 27 -- White's car refueled in Nashville.

March 30 -- White's car refueled in Memphis.

March 31, April 1, April 10, April 21, April 27 -- White's car refueled in Nashville.

April 28 -- White's car refueled in Cookeville.

May 2, May 5 -- White's car refueled in Nashville.

May 6 -- White's car refueled in Millington, a Memphis suburb.

May 8, May 9, May 12 -- White's car refueled in Nashville.

May 14 -- White's car refueled in Memphis.

May 15 -- White's car refueled in Bellevue.

May 18 -- White's car refueled in Lebanon.

May 20 -- White's car refueled in Sevierville.

May 23, May 30, June 4, June 5 -- White's car refueled in Nashville.

June 8 -- White's car refueled in Knoxville.

June 11 -- White's car refueled in Nashville. Last entry in fuel log provided by the state.

July 1 - White's license reinstated for the Louisiana ticket.

July 13 -- White tenders resignation letter to the governor.

SOURCE: Tennessee Department of Safety; state Department of Correction

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GRAPHIC: CREDIT: ERIC PARSONS , STAFFGov. Phil Bredesen held an impromptu news conference yesterday to announce that Tennessee Department of Correction Commissioner Quenton L. White had submitted his letter of resignation.

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