



Examiners criticize finances at Alabama Historical Commission

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The Associated Press
3/18/2005, 4:58 p.m. CT

MONTGOMERY, Ala. (AP) -- A state audit of the Alabama Historical Commission accuses the former executive director of questionable expenditures, including hiring a \$78,999-a-year fund-raiser who didn't raise any funds.

The audit, issued Friday by the state Department of Examiners of Public Accounts, covers the last three years of Lee Warner's tenure as executive director of the historic preservation agency. Warner resigned under pressure on Aug. 20, 2004, but was paid through Jan. 7.

The examiners noted that Warner hired Lisa Lichtfuss in July 2003 to raise money for the commission and its nonprofit foundation. She received a salary of \$78,999 annually, plus \$1,500 per month to cover the cost of commuting from her home in Tupelo, Miss., and providing housing in Montgomery.

She resigned effective Nov. 1, 2004, after the examiners began to question her job duties, the report said.

"Lisa Lichtfuss was instructed to direct any funds raised to the Foundation; however, she did not raise any funds the entire time she was employed by the Commission," the examiners' audit said.

Messages left at the homes of Warner and Lichtfuss were not immediately returned Friday.

The commission's chairman, former state Sen. Bill Drinkard, said Lichtfuss helped get the commission's foundation started and worked with Warner to raise money. Drinkard said there were donations, but they might not have been credited to Lichtfuss in the records.

Gov. Bob Riley serves on the commission. His communications director, Jeff Emerson, said, "The audit certainly gives new insight into why commission members sought to make a change in leadership."

The Alabama Historical Commission is a volunteer board of state officials and appointees. The commission's executive director is the top full-time person and supervises the day-to-day activities of a staff of more than 100.

The examiners' audit said the commission purchased a house in Gulf Shores in May 2002 for the use of the site director of Fort Morgan, Persijs Kolberg. The house was built in 2000.

In records at the commission, Warner indicated that offering the house rent free was

necessary to get someone of Kolberg's talents, and that the purchase had been approved by the state attorney general and the state Personnel Department. But the examiners said they could find no evidence of that approval.

Drinkard said Fort Morgan is 22 miles from Gulf Shores, and the commission felt it was important for Kolberg to live in Gulf Shores to build support for the historic attraction and help boost tourism. He said the house cost "a little over \$100,000," but he was unsure of the exact amount.

In another case, the commission hired an employee to run its Capitol gift shop for about \$42,000 per year. "This appears to be an excessive salary for a small gift shop manager when compared to similar types of retail operations at other state agencies," the examiners said.

The examiners said the commission did not always notify the state treasurer when money needed to be transferred from an investment fund to an operating fund. That caused money in the state treasury to be used to cover commission expenses. The examiners said the commission should transfer \$1.76 million to the state treasury to reconcile the accounts.

Drinkard said the commission discovered the accounting imbalance several years ago and sought the examiners' help in setting it straight. He said no state money was lost.

The examiners noted that the Historical Commission is in the process of developing a ferry to run between Fort Morgan and Dauphin Island, but they said operating a ferry appears to be outside the commission's historic preservation duties that are set out in state law.

Drinkard said the commission has an advisory opinion from the attorney general saying it can operate a ferry.

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