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## Rackleff: Ex-office manager may have embezzled up to \$500,000

By TaMaryn Waters • DEMOCRAT STAFF WRITER  
• April 27, 2010

Leon County Commission Chairman Bob Rackleff said Shanna Lewis, who did not disclose a conviction for embezzlement from a previous job, may have embezzled up to \$500,000 as the office manager at Innovation Park.

Lewis was fired Friday, and Rackleff is now asking that Linda Nichol森, executive director for Innovation Park, resign based on what he called profound "mismanagement and carelessness."

Rackleff may face resistance in his call for Nichol森's resignation from at least one board member. Ray Eaton, the longest serving member, said Nichol森 has played a key role in the park's growth.

The research park in southwest Tallahassee has an annual budget of about \$1 million and 16 buildings.

"Linda has been there since the creation of the park," Eaton said. "It's all been built up based on its operations. It's created its own money. I don't see that as a failure."

Rackleff, who serves as treasurer of the Leon County Research and Development Authority, which oversees Innovation Park gave the *Tallahassee Democrat* copies of several checks Monday. The checks, made out to Lewis, 34, were written this year for various amounts including one for \$6,066 and

another for \$4,918.

Last year, checks ranging from \$8,159.20 to \$4,301.82 were made out to Lewis. Rackleff said he believes the documentation shows Lewis forged the signature of the board's chairman Tom Barron. Each of the checks only had one signature.

Rackleff said Lewis copied Barron's signature from newsletters and applied the signature to the checks. Barron is also president of Capital City Bank.

But Rackleff was careful to point out that the investigation is not complete. The Tallahassee Police Department was called by Nichol森 to investigate late last week once several discrepancies were uncovered during an audit, which is still in the works.

Rackleff said he and others first became suspicious when Lewis could not readily provide records to the auditors, who then did a criminal background search that uncovered her past conviction.

Once the investigation is completed, TPD will seek the advice of the State Attorney's Office to determine if any charges should be filed, said TPD spokesman Officer David McCranie. No arrests have been made.

Lewis didn't return repeated calls from the *Tallahassee Democrat*. Nichol森 also could not be reached.

But in a post on her Facebook page, Lewis wrote, "Never believe everything you hear and only half of what you read and remember that there is always two sides to every story. If you don't have both sides of the story keep your mouth shut and don't talk about what you don't know."

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The Florida Commerce Credit Union, where Lewis had a personal account, notified TPD when it found "large deposits that had no explanation," Rackleff said.

Rackleff said Lewis received bills and wrote checks related to Innovation Park as part of her duties. Nicholsen signed off on the checks, and Barron had the authority to sign checks.

Rackleff said he was stunned to learn bank statements were sent directly to Lewis, and that Nicholsen did not have passwords and other access to the office's computer systems or finance records. The recent developments have caused bills to go unpaid, he said.

Lewis was paid \$42,067 annually; Nicholsen is paid \$104,000.

This year's audit of Innovation Park's financial records, conducted for the first time by the Thomas Howell Ferguson accounting firm, uncovered the embezzlement conviction. During a meeting April 20, board members said they didn't know about Lewis's conviction; Nicholsen also said she wasn't aware.

Lewis came to the April 20 meeting and read a statement in which she accused a board member of sexual harassment. Nicholsen said she had previous knowledge of the sexual harassment claims, but they were never investigated or reported.

Nicholsen said she didn't conduct a background check when interviewing Lewis because the board doesn't have a policy requiring one.

Lewis was hired as office manager after she completed her sentence at Leon County jail, where she was allowed to serve time at night. According to court records, Lewis stole \$181,089 between April 1997 and August 2000 from her previous employer, Harrell Roofing in Tallahassee.

Nicholsen was on the hiring committee, and she said Lewis was "the number one applicant," according to a letter dated Oct. 30, 2001, and obtained by the *Democrat*. Lewis's resume was the main tool used to determine whether she should be hired.

"The application was her resume, which omits the

fact that she ever worked for Harrell Roofing," Rackleff said.

Rackleff plans to make a recommendation that an interim director, more than likely a current Leon County employee, be appointed during an emergency meeting called for Wednesday. The board will ultimately have to vote on whether Nicholsen keeps her job.



Leon County Commission Chairman Bob Rackleff

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