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Groveland must rehire officer after charges dropped

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by Lauren Ritchie, Orlando Sentinel

Was Groveland's criminal investigation of one of its former officers dramatically sloppy or was it a deliberate misuse of police power calculated to ruin the life of a longtime officer?

That question is reeking like roadkill after Lake County's chief prosecutor last week dismissed charges of theft and credit-card misuse against the officer and wrote a rare memo explaining how the state got hoodwinked into charging her in the first place.

"It's been a battle. 'Thank God' is what I've got to say," said Katherine "Cindy" Homelius, a 21-year veteran of law enforcement who always insisted she had done nothing wrong and demanded a jury trial.

Homelius worked for Clermont Police Department for 18 years, then went to Groveland in 2011. She had no problems until she started helping organize a union, and then she was fired in January 2014, supposedly for poor work performance.

Three months later, Groveland Det. John Moore submitted a world-class shoddy investigation to the state attorney, and Homelius was charged with using a debit card belonging to the department-sponsored Explorer post to buy Christmas party supplies.

She appealed her dismissal to the Public Employees Relations Commission, which ruled in January that Homelius, 57, had been "targeted and terminated" for helping to bring in the International Union of Police Associations, Local 6090, not for failing to do her job as

the city claimed. PERC's hearing officer bluntly stated that city officials had been untruthful and that Groveland used poor performance as a "pretext" to get rid of her.

The hearing officer ordered Groveland to stop discriminating against employees who want a union, to give Homelius back pay and to rehire her when the criminal charges were resolved. Groveland unwisely filed objections, which a panel of three PERC commissioners slapped down two weeks ago, this time ordering the city immediately to rehire her, saying the criminal charges were bogus.

Last week, the State Attorney's Office agreed and dropped the charges.

In a memo, division supervisor Walter Forgie wrote that Homelius, an adviser to the Explorers and one of two officers with a debit card to the Explorers' account, bought party supplies on Dec. 15, 2013, at BJ's Wholesale Club. The take included four quarts of sour cream, hamburgers, buns and sodas. She bought \$450 in groceries total but paid for only \$119.02 with the Explorer debit card.

Moore based his case on a sworn statement from Groveland police Sgt. Stephanie Crews, one of nearly a half dozen officers who advised the Explorers, saying that the expenditure was not authorized and the items purchased weren't used on behalf of the group, Forgie wrote.

What Detective Moore, who didn't return a message seeking comment, failed to do was to any detecting. He didn't contact fellow Officer Jesse Baker, the holder of the other debit card to the account and the Explorer Committee Chairman; Allison Auld, the wife of another officer and the bookkeeper for the Explorers, Cherri Griffin, another adviser, or Tiffany Petruzzi, a student leader of the Explorers.

Had Moore roused himself to this very arduous task, he could have learned that Crews failed to attend a meeting in which the group authorized Homelius to spend up to \$125 for a Christmas party at her home, which both Groveland officers and the Explorers were to attend.

"You'd think the first person you'd want to interview is the person keeping the books and the people on the committee that makes decisions about events and how the money is disbursed," said Fritz Scheller, Homelius' Orlando lawyer. "Instead, for whatever reason, they declined to interview the people with direct knowledge."

Auld said last week that she met with Groveland City Manager Redmond Jones before Homelius was charged to try to quiet rumors that money was being misspent, but Moore never contacted her or asked to see the books while building the case on Homelius.

Baker, the other cardholder, said "I was never asked any questions. None of the other advisers were asked any questions."

Baker testified on Homelius' behalf in a PERC hearing, and on the day the charges were dropped, Groveland opened an internal investigation on him. What part of "stop retaliating" is this crew not getting?

Confronted by the State Attorney's Office, which did interview those involved, Moore claimed he didn't know that the group had a bookkeeper, even though the city manager

was well aware, and Crews contested the testimony from the defense witnesses but "saw no way to prove to a jury that the money was not authorized by the Explorers," Forgie wrote.

Here, let's pause. Groveland would have you believe in a very small town with a very small police department that a "misunderstanding" resulted in an officer being charged with a crime, shamefully arrested and booked into the Lake County Jail. Really? Would that be because folks in small towns with small police departments never talk to one another? Anyone buying that?

Such tortured explanations for a vicious prosecution are not plausible, and the responsibility for the mess rests squarely on the shoulders of Chief Melvin Tennyson. It's an insult to expect anyone in Groveland or anywhere else to believe such tripe.

This situation is very simple and profoundly disturbing: Somebody wanted Homelius out — badly enough to take her liberty, destroy her reputation and obliterate her ability to make a living as a police officer.

Perhaps the purpose of the mission to tarnish Homelius was to prevent PERC from forcing the city to rehire her. Even now, neither Tennyson nor the city manager will say when — or if — they will rehire Homelius as ordered.

Regardless, Groveland needs a dose of common sense — and fast. The mayor and City Council members must step in and stop this runaway train. Meanwhile, the city will be lucky if every officer working there doesn't get nervous and quit.

After all, those on the good side of management today might end up on wrong side tomorrow — and packed away to the jail in the back of a squad car.

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