



Rick Taylor made Visitor Center employees collect money for wife's cookie business and record sales former employees say.



Sweet Tweets

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There are still a limited number of Valentine Cookies available at both Key Designs at Rodgers Family Pharmacy (Petal) and The H'burg Visitors Center (on hwy 49 in Hburg). HOWEVER....if you did not get the Valentine you wanted.....you can still get some for FREE - plus a t-shirt - plus ZOO passes! JUST for entering one or BOTH of Visit Hattiesburg's Valentines Contests! (The UN-valentine contest even has a "dinner for one" prize from Vicki's On Walnut)

Just go to **Visit Hattiesburg** page and enter both!

Two former employees of the Hattiesburg Visitors Center spoke to HPNM and said that their boss, Rick Taylor, required them to sell his wife's cookies, collect payment for cookie orders and keep detailed records of all cash payments for the baked goods as part of their work duties.



One of the former employees described the responsibilities she and other employees were given by Taylor in operating his wife's cookie business from the taxpayer-funded Visitors Center; the other former employee simply corroborated that information. Both wish to remain anonymous, but the former employee who discussed her job responsibilities has given permission to publish her recorded comments, providing her identity is protected. That recording will be published next week, but a partial transcript is published below.

The information provided by these whistle blowers [confirms the report posted September 4 by the Hattiesburg Patriot](#) detailing suspected violations of state ethics and purchasing laws by Taylor, long-time executive director of the Hattiesburg Convention Center and, until June 2017, of the Hattiesburg Tourism Commission. Specifically, the Patriot published information indicating that Taylor had an apparent conflict of interest and seems to have used his office and public resources improperly to help his wife build and "brand" her business and obtain, unfairly, an immeasurable advantage in the marketplace.

In the September 4th report, the Hattiesburg Patriot referred to misuse of public resources in terms of promotions carried out by staff members of the Tourism Commission and Convention Center marketing offices. This new account heightens the level of suspected misconduct, however, as it draws Visitors Center employees directly into sales transactions for Mrs. Taylor's bakery and further substantiates the previously reported violations by Mrs. Taylor of the Cottage Food Operations Law. As the operator of a cottage food business, Ms. Taylor is expressly forbidden to advertise or sell her product online or in retail or wholesale settings.

Following is a transcription of comments received from the former employee who called the Hattiesburg Patriot to describe her former duties selling cookies at the Visitors Center:

“She (Mrs. Taylor) would bake those cookies, have the orders for them; he (Taylor) would bring them in the morning to us at the visitors center and the people would come there and pay for them, and we would have to take care of the money. And he had a little box on the wall that we had to put the money in, and we had to keep a close accounting of it. He kinda didn’t accuse anybody, but he said one time that she was short of money. I didn’t think it was right that they were using the Visitors Center for us to take care of her money for her cookies.

“When she (Mrs. Taylor) would take the orders she would tell them (customers) that they could pick them up at the Visitors Center at certain certain days. She didn’t let them come to her house. The cookies would come by Rick on his way to work in the morning. And they would be boxed up and everything, and who was to pick them up, and how much money we was to collect. I don’t know if that means anything, but they had no business using the Visitors Center that way.

“There was a box on the wall in our little workroom where we would put the money down in, and we didn’t have a key to it, you know. We just put the money down there. and we put on the money – if it was a check, we didn’t have to put who it was from. If it was cash, we put a notation who it was from – And then we had a little notebook that we listed who bought cookies today and they paid \$14.50 or whatever.

“He (taylor) has been abusing that place for years, and something needs to be done about it.”

Neither Convention Center Director Rick Taylor nor Tourism Commission attorney David Ott responded to request for comments prior to the publication of this article. Taylor is the current Convention Center Director, which received the 2% restaurant tax.