



## **WOULLARD'S USE OF DISTRICT 4 REC FUNDS EXAMINED BY STATE AUDITOR**

A source with first-hand knowledge told HPNM that the Office of the State Auditor began examining District 4 Supervisor Rod Woullard's use of county funds as early this summer. The investigation involved funds spent from the District 4 Recreation Fund and focused on his use of those funds to employ Sandra Thompson.

Each Supervisor in Forrest County has a Recreation Fund, part of the General Fund, from which they direct monies to recreational projects or activities. HPNM has learned that Woullard used District 4 Recreation Funds to hire Thompson as a Special Project Officer for District 4 in June 2007. That's prohibited by state law. "All employees of the county shall be employees of the county as a whole and not of any particular supervisor district." (Mississippi State Code Ann., §19-2-9)

Various county records – from Board of Supervisors' minutes to a workers' compensation claim – clearly identify her as a Special Project Officer whose work centered on recreational programs and activities in District 4. District 4 Recreation Funds were used to pay her salary and travel, with the approval of the Board of Supervisors. Woullard is the only Forrest County supervisor who has paid an employee directly

from Recreation Funds.

Ms. Thompson was hired initially at \$12.00 an hour, but advanced quickly and received regular raises. Here's what HPNM found:

June 21, 2007	\$12.00
February 4, 2008	\$13.75
April 4, 2008	\$14.44
January 22, 2009	\$16.35
County-wide Raise	\$17.85
August 11, 2014	\$18.85
County-wide Raise 2016	\$19.79
September 6, 2018	Voluntary Resignation

Ms. Thompson drove a county vehicle and used county-provided fuel. She worked from an office Woullard provided at The First Tee of The Pine Belt, in a facility he says he built in 2008 as District 4 Supervisor. Her job was to plan, direct and promote District 4 recreation programs. The source of funds used to build the charity's facility are currently under investigation by HPNM.

Thompson was named Executive Director of First Tee of the Pine Belt in June 2007. This means that somehow she answered phones and handled other duties connected with the charity while holding down a full-time job as District 4's Special Project Officer for recreation. First Tee of the Pine Belt, a non-profit that uses golf to build character and teach healthy choices to young people, is described online as the brainchild of Rod Woullard.

Outside employment is not forbidden by the county. This is what the Forrest County Employee Handbook says:

No employee may engage in employment which could cause a conflict of interest or use his County employment for personal gain. Outside employment must not interfere with performance of duties for Forrest County.

For the record, county attorney David Miller says that Ms. Thompson was a county employee, not a District 4 employee. However, here's a description he provided of Ms. Thompson's duties from a 2016 submission for workers' compensation:

*Ms. Thompson's position as a Special Project Officer involves planning and directing various recreation programs for the citizens of District 4, facilitating the participation of the City of Hattiesburg, the Hattiesburg Public School District, and local non-profit entities in such programs, and communicating with the public regarding the nature and availability of such programs. Ms. Thompson's work also involves various administrative and clerical tasks such as record-keeping, data collection, and reporting. (Parentheses added by HPNM)*

Re-read the italicized words in the paragraph above and you'll see that Ms. Thompson's involvement with First Tee of the Pine Belt allows her to kill two birds with one stone: First Tee is a local non-profit entity and it benefits young people (presumably found at Hattiesburg Public School District).

### **WHO'S MINDING THE STORE?**

HPNM has been told that board members consider Recreation Funds discretionary and generally respect their fellow supervisors' decisions on how the funds are spent. Courteous, right? It's lawful. We know that because a vote is taken. The net effect of this courtesy, though, is that supervisors give each other carte blanche in spending taxpayer money from Recreation Funds. That can amount to tens to hundreds of thousands of dollars over an period of years.

Consider Ms. Thompson's salary. She started out in June 2007 making \$24,960 a year. In roughly six months she received a salary bump and went to an annual salary of \$28,600. Two months later, she again received a bump, to \$30,035. Her 2009 raise brought her annual income to \$34,008, and a subsequent

county-wide raise increased it again, to \$37,128. In 2014, Ms. Thompson received another pay increase; her salary then was \$39,208. A 2016 county-wide raise brought her annual salary to \$41,163.



Woullard is the only Supervisor to possess two County vehicles.

Ms. Thompson voluntarily resigned in September 2018. The vehicle she drove, inexplicably, is parked at Supervisor Woullard's residence, along with his county-provided vehicle.

HPNM has requested additional information from Forrest County, including copies of any reports or work products Ms. Thompson provided to the board and copies of any communications to or from the State Auditor's Office regarding the administration of county Recreation Funds. HPNM's investigation into Woullard's use of District 4's Recreation fund is ongoing and an update will be provided in the coming weeks.