

Nepotism charges lead to parks department shakeup

One manager fired, another resigned

By HILLARY BORRUD
Capital Bureau

SALEM — Human resources investigators discovered nepotism, purchases of expensive bikes and other problems in an Oregon Parks and Recreation Department program that dispenses grant money for recreation projects around the state.

The problems prompted agency director Lisa Sumption to fire a manager and seek the resignation of an assistant director who oversees the program, although a lower-level employee at the center of some of the issues continues to work for the department.

In their report, investigators faulted the assistant director and division manager for allowing State Trails Coordinator Rocky Houston to sign hiring paperwork and supervise his daughter, and for approving the purchase of three bicycles and related equipment for Houston and other employees in 2014 which cost the state \$8,700.

The investigation cost more than \$16,000: nearly \$12,000 for assistance from lawyers at the Oregon Department of Justice, and \$4,300 to temporarily hire a retired state employee, Jon Dufrene, to investigate alleged problems.

Steve Kay, manager of the grants division, was fired on May 15, four months after he was placed on paid administrative leave. Kay's boss, assistant director Roger Roper, abruptly resigned in January after Sumption asked him to step down.

Nepotism has been a topic of discussion for years among employees at the Oregon Parks and Recreation Department, where the family members who worked together included Sumption, her sister-in-law and her cousin. The sister-in-law, Tasha Pe-



tersen, was the agency's human resources director until Sumption was promoted to director in early 2014, and Sumption's cousin, Jodi Woiderski, also worked in human resources. Woiderski transferred to a different agency in September 2013 and Petersen was transferred to a different agency roughly a month after Sumption, who has worked at the agency since 2007, was appointed as director in February 2014.

Looking for problems

Kay and Roper said Sumption went looking for problems in an attempt to force them out of the parks department. Kay described the nepotism with Houston's daughter as a "paperwork infraction," and said he and Roper were both good employees with no documented performance issues. Roper also said the investigation seemed like an overreaction.

"I still keep wondering why she bombed a city to hit a fly here," Roper said.

Investigators found that in 2014, the grants unit spent at least \$8,700 to purchase three bicycles and accessories for Rocky Houston and two other employees to use as part of their work.

Sumption said the investigation was necessary because accountability is a top priority at the parks department.

"I have the same expectations of every one of my team members," Sumption said.

Soon after Sumption was appointed director of the parks department, she sent an update to employees that her sister-in-law had been

transferred to the Oregon Department of Forestry. Human resources investigators cited that notice as one of the reasons Kay should have been aware that close relatives were not allowed to supervise each other.

Sumption decided to investigate the grants division after she found out Kay allowed Houston to supervise his daughter, Hayley Houston, who was hired along with a couple of other teenagers in November 2014 for a temporary filing project.

On Dec. 30, a state employee from the Oregon Department of Administrative Services spotted Houston with a couple of teenagers in a Jeep at a state fleet fuel station.

"They thought it looked like the driver's kids with him," Brian King, the Department of Administrative Services' fleet and parking services manager, wrote in a complaint to the park department. "Can you please check it out?"

Kay responded that nothing was wrong: Houston was simply refueling a state vehicle with a couple of temporary employees on their way



Courtesy Oregon Parks and Recreation
Lisa Sumption, director of the Oregon Parks and Recreation Department. Sumption fired one department manager and asked another to resign following a nepotism investigation.

reminded Fegley of a similar arrangement Kay had recently proposed, according to the investigative report.

Kay wanted to hire another employee's daughter for a temporary job where her mother would have supervised her, and Fegley said "no." Kay had hired the daughter, Ashley Olsen, the previous year for a different temporary gig.

Chris Havel, a spokesman for the parks department, said nepotism played a role in that hiring decision and Olsen's mother — Michele Scalise — was in charge of the program, although not technically Olsen's supervisor.

"She wasn't supervising her, but she influenced the hire," Havel said. "That alone qualifies (as nepotism)."

Paperwork trail

Last winter, Rocky Houston signed hiring and termination paperwork, as well as time sheets, for all of the temporary employees including his daughter.

Rocky Houston was "authorized to essentially function as (his daughter's) supervisor," according to the investigator's report. Kay was aware of the family relationship, but never reported it to human resources employees.

A human resources employee did notice Haley

Houston was related to Rocky Houston, but she told investigators that Rocky Houston promised he would not supervise his daughter.

Investigators found a third instance of nepotism among employees Kay supervised, when an employee signed the hiring paperwork for her live-in boyfriend. Kay told investigators he did not learn of that relationship until after the park department had hired the boyfriend.

Investigators found that in 2014, the grants unit spent at least \$8,700 to purchase three bicycles and accessories for Rocky Houston and two other employees to use as part of their work.

Houston already had a state bike but told his managers that he needed a better bike to check trails and work with a committee that advises the state on selecting and managing Oregon scenic bikeways. Houston had also used his personal bike for work and broke the frame. Houston's Niner Jet 9 Carbon bike cost the state \$2,749, plus more than \$1,000 for bike parts and repairs in 2014.

The state spent \$3,500 on a bike for another grants program limited duration employee, Laura Underhill, and \$1,435 on a new bike for Bicycle Recreation Specialist Alexandra Phillips, ac-

ording to state records. The agency had previously purchased a couple of bikes for employees, including Houston's old bike, for \$1,000 to \$1,500 each. The state purchased rental bikes for the public from Sears.

Last year, employees in the grants unit initially stored their bikes at home and did not enter them into the state's inventory system. Houston kept his bike at home, even after the other two bikes were brought back and stored at the parks department in fall 2014 and as of February, Houston's bike still had not been entered into the state's asset management system. Roper said the employees were concerned about the security of the parks department's bike storage area in Salem, which is a locked cage in the parking area that employees can only access with a key. Roper said he believed the employees only used the bikes for work.

The investigation also faulted Kay for repeatedly allowing Houston to work outside his approved schedule, including one occasion when Houston worked 12 days in a row.

Houston accumulated approximately 145 hours of overtime in 2014, the third largest amount at the agency that year.

The parks department has been working to better monitor employees' work hours since a March 2014 complaint filed with the state's fraud, waste and abuse hotline that employees had not properly recorded work absences. An investigation ultimately revealed that two human resources employees specifically cited in the complaint — HR director Tasha Petersen and HR analyst Susan Kirschenmann — had recorded on their timesheets that they worked hours when they were actually out of the office for vacation or sick leave.

The Capital Bureau is a collaboration between EO Media Group and Pamplin Media Group.

Knappa scores 14-4 win over Seaside

The Daily Astorian

KNAPPA — Reuben Cruz had two doubles, and pitchers Michal Goodman and Mason Hoover held the Seaside bats in check, helping Knappa score a 14-4 win over the Gulls in a Junior State Baseball game Thursday at Teevin Field.

Seaside's Brent Walsh suffered an injury sliding into third base, and the Gulls finished the game with just eight players.

Goodman pitched four and two-thirds innings for the win, while Ryker Coffey added a double for Knappa, which hosts Clatskanie for a doubleheader Thursday.

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