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County attorney resigns

**By JANN CLARK
Staff Writer**

Taney County Attorney Robert "Bob" Paulson resigned Friday in the midst of a controversy swirling around the Taney County Commission as it faces complaints filed with the state's Attorney General Office for allegedly violating the Sunshine Law.

Paulson submitted his resignation Friday and the commission accepted it during an executive session meeting. Paulson came on board with the county in 1999 as an assistant prosecutor.

In the release and settlement agreement, Paulson agreed to stay on with the commission for six months to help facilitate a transition as the commission works to out-source, interview and eventually hire someone to take Paulson's place.

Paulson agreed not to represent any legal cases against the county for two years and the commission and Paulson have agreed not to sue each other.

"It came as quite a shock," Western District Commissioner

Jim Strafuss said. "Bob's a great attorney and he'd be on my short list to call. He'll be successful and committed in whatever he does. He's a very good friend and I'll miss seeing him around the courthouse."

Paulson said, "I've resigned as Taney County counselor. It has been an honor to serve the people of Taney County for the past 13 years with the last 11 as the Taney County counselor..."

"On a personal note, I am beginning a new chapter in my life and I look forward to the challenges ahead. I want to thank the people of Taney County for allowing me to serve them."

But Paulson's resignation is just part of what's transpired in the last few days at the commission. Two complaints were filed last week with the Attorney General's Office against the Taney County Commission.

Nanci Gonder, press secretary for the Attorney General's Office, said Monday that there has been no new complaints this week. However, two complaints in connection with the possibility that





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the commission has been holding 'improper meetings' have been lodged and the state agency is taking the complaints under review.

"Our general goal, if we think there are actions that involve Sunshine Law violations, then we try to correct the problem," Gonder said Thursday. "Sometimes it's a lack of knowledge or a difference of opinion."

When the allegations surfaced, the commission hired Springfield Attorney Pat Keck, of Keck & Austin, to conduct an independent investigation so there wouldn't be any doubt about its authenticity.

Keck, a long-time litigator who has handled these types of investigations for both the public and private sector, said she has been in contact with the Attorney General's Office and has offered to turn over her investigative findings if the Attorney General's Office wants them.

"If the Attorney General wants them then I have the authority to release them," Keck said. "My investigation will involve every facet of the Sunshine Law...This is an open investigation for all violations. It's not just looking at the commission."

Keck will be overseeing a Public Service Request (PSR) submitted by a terminated employee, who requested a copy of the commission's emails during a 30-day period in January when the commission was working on its budget process.

Keck will also handle the complaints filed against the commission in connection with alleged violations of the state's

Sunshine Laws and any other issues that arise in connection with those allegations.

"I, as well as the other two commissioners, take any complaint seriously," Strafuss said. "It appears that this complaint focuses on a meeting that took place on January 26, while I was in Jefferson City.

"The Sunshine Law is in place to provide open government to the citizens and should never be violated."

And according to the minutes of that day, there was a situation where Presiding Commission Ron Houseman took minutes during a meeting. Strafuss was absent.

The County Clerk's Office records show that Eastern District Commissioner Danny Strahan "stuck his head in the door while Ron Houseman, Dixie Wagner and Linda Gifford were discussing county insurance. As a result, Ron Houseman drafted said Minutes."

Strahan said Monday that he's requested that his emails, which he says total five during the dates in question, be released to the public. Strahan said there needs to be some finality to the issue.

"I wanted them to be released because from the allegations it looks like there's some kind of cover up," Strahan said. "And that's just not the case. We're trying to get everything out in the open."

Keck will meet with the commission Friday in executive session. At that point, the commission will hear Keck's recommendations. Keck said she doesn't anticipate having the investigation completed by Friday.