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## Former county attorney alleges cover up

By JANN CLARK  
Staff Writer

Former Taney County attorney Bob Paulson filed a complaint with the state Attorney General's Office earlier this month alleging that two Taney County commissioners violated the state's Sunshine Law, that threats were made against county employees and that a financial cover-up was attempted.

In the complaint, released Monday by officials with the Attorney General's Office to the Taney County Times, Paulson said, "violations of the Sunshine Law and intimidation of a code enforcement officer by a commissioner to prevent enforcement of Taney County regulations" occurred.

Paulson, who resigned from his position with the county after he filed the complaint on April 4, also alleges that Eastern District Commissioner Danny Strahan threatened to fire a county employee if that employee interfered with the \$150 million NASCAR racetrack development that's in process.

Paulson also implies, in the complaint filed with the Attorney General's Office, that Presiding Commissioner Ron Houseman

attempted to award a county contract in exchange for a board appointment and possible financial compensation.

On January 26, newly elected Presiding Commissioner Ron Houseman and Eastern District Commissioner Danny Strahan conducted a meeting regarding going 'out for bid' on the county's workmen's compensation insurance, the complaint reads.

Paulson said he was looking for Houseman in the Taney County Courthouse when he found out that Houseman was in the Conference Room with the door closed. (The Conference Room is located upstairs in the commission offices.)

Paulson said he walked in on the meeting. He said Strahan was in the corner of the room and was blocked in. Also in the meeting were two female employees whose duties included aspects of bidding the workmen's compensation insurance, the complaint reads.

The context of the meeting was that Houseman wanted the county to go back to the 'Trust' for its workmen's compensation insurance, which Taney County left in 2008, something Western District Commissioner Jim





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Strafuss wasn't in favor of, the councilor said in the complaint.

(The "Trust" Paulson is referring to in the complaint is - MAC, the Missouri Association of Counties. MAC, which held the counties contract until 2008, was one of the recent bidders vying to provide workmen's compensation benefits to the county. Connell Insurance has provided those services to the county, at a savings of almost \$250,000, since 2008, documents show. The commission voted to award Connell Insurance the workmen's compensation contract Monday shortly before the findings of an independent investigative report into Paulson's complaints was made public. (See related story.)

Strafuss, who was attending a conference in Washington, D.C., at the time of the January 26 meeting between Houseman and Strahan, wasn't aware of the meeting and the meeting wasn't posted, Paulson alleged in the complaint. (Those two allegations were deemed to be accurate, according to the independent investigation conducted by Springfield Attorney Pat Keck on behalf of the commission.)

"I assume because of my appearance, that Mr. Houseman decided to take 'minutes' of the

meeting," Paulson said. "He later stated in his 'minutes' that he began taking the minutes because Mr. Strahan stuck his head in the door.

"When the county clerk received Mr. Houseman's draft of the minutes, she questioned why there was a meeting that was not posted and complained that she had not been informed."

Paulson said in the complaint, "The minutes prepared by Presiding Commissioner Houseman clearly misrepresent what occurred and constitute a cover up of an intentional violation of the Sunshine Law."

The former county attorney went on to say in the complaint that Strahan was reportedly very angry and stated that Strahan said, "the next time Paulson walks into a meeting he is going to be fired."

"I believe this statement clearly demonstrates Mr. Strahan was aware that he was breaking the law," Paulson said. "Clearly, whether the door was open or closed, the Sunshine Law was being violated."

Paulson also alleges in his complaint that after the January 26 meeting, (found to be an illegal meeting in the investigative

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## •Cover up

report), Strahan and Houseman changed the rules in the bidding process in relation to the workmen's compensation bid process, the complaint shows.

Paulson said Houseman, formerly the Taney County Clerk, had previously served on the "Trust," (MAC) board and that an opening on that board had recently become available. According to Paulson's complaint, the "Trust" board meets quarterly and pays its board members per diem.

Paulson said, "there has been a culture of disrespect for the Sunshine Law since early January when Presiding Commissioner Houseman took office. In my opinion, he has regularly violated the Sunshine Law.

"He has also asked me for opinions using specific fact patterns so that he could use that opinion to give himself plausible deniability when I believe he knew he was violating the Sunshine Law."

Paulson went on to say that Straffuss had intentionally stayed away from the office when specific matters had been listed on the commission agenda.

"He had been struggling with avoiding Commissioner Houseman's attempts to talk to him in private about county business," Paulson said in the complaint. "I believe I am compelled by the Canons of Ethics to report these matters

to your attention."

Paulson's complaint also alleges that Strahan used 'intimidation' to keep a county employee from conducting any investigation into the way the NASCAR race track project, located off Highway 86 and Highway 65 in the southern part of Taney County, is being developed.

The NASCAR race track project recently came under fire by the state Department of Natural Resources (DNR)

for permit violations by land owner/developer Russell Cook, who had no 'land disturbance permits' to clear his land for the development at the time.

Paulson alleges in the complaint that Strahan put 'undue pressure' on a county employee to 'not disturb the racetrack project' near the Branson airport. The former councilor said Strahan said the project was agricultural and that nothing was to be done and that the county employee was not to call DNR.

Paulson alleges that Strahan said, "no one had better bother the project or they would be fired because that racetrack is a great economic opportunity for Taney County," the former councilor claims in the complaint.

Paulson said Strahan wanted the county employee removed from his/her department and threatened the employee's job on several occasions. The employee was reassigned to another depart-





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ment and nothing was done (at the time of the complaint) to enforce the land disturbance regulations, the complaint reads.

DNR and the county's planning and zoning department have recently issued 'land disturbance' permits to Cook so he can move forward with the project. However, the project has not been before the Taney County Planning and Zoning Board for approval.

Cook, who was one of the developers on the now dormant Tanstone Project located in the middle of Branson, has been soliciting help from state Legislators and the Missouri Department of Transportation (MoDOT) to obtain a state funding mechanism in the construction of an estimated \$70 million interchange to facilitate traffic for the track.

Strahan, who has a copy of Paulson's complaint, said he couldn't comment on the complaint. Strahan, who said he has nothing to hide, said

that any and all comments at this time should come from Attorney Pat Keck until her investigation is complete.

Keck was recently hired by the Taney County commissioners to conduct an independent investigation into Paulson's complaint. Keck, with the approval of the commission, released the initial findings to the public Monday in connection with her preliminary investigation into the allegations lodged by Paulson.

Keck said she is still in the process of conducting interviews in connection with Paulson's racetrack allegations.

"I have started the investigation but have not completed it," Keck said. "However, it will be completed next week. I have found some inconsistencies in the complaint."

Telephone calls to Houseman Monday were not returned. A spokesperson for the Attorney General's Office said 'the complaint' is under review and that 'no comment' will be made at this time.