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County commissioner remains silent

Questions persist about apparent conflict of interest

By Gary Garton

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MIAMI, Okla. — With questions persisting about an apparent conflict of interest, Ottawa County Commissioner Joe Crawford declined to discuss his private business Monday at the regular commissioners' meeting, saying he was "on county time."

When asked whether he had been on county time last Tuesday when he was trying to salvage a bulldozer rented by his private company, Crawford responded, "I have vacation days and comp time coming to me."

Crawford accidentally drove a bulldozer he was renting for his company, Center Line Construction, into a water-filled mine sinkhole July 7 at the south edge of Commerce. At the time, he was clearing a vacant lot behind Newell Coach Corp. in North Miami and dumping dirt into the sinkhole. On Tuesday, July 10, he was at the scene overseeing an effort to pull the dozer from the sinkhole.

Questions about whether Crawford has used his position as an elected county commissioner to benefit his company have persisted in the wake of the accident.

Crawford was awarded \$4,998.75 in contracts by the city of Commerce, without competitive bidding, to clear the area between the sinkhole and the Newell property. That money was reimbursed to the city by the Oklahoma Department of Environmental Quality.

Newell then hired the commissioner, as a private contractor, to finish the job for an additional \$17,500. The lot being cleared is also under consideration as the site of a state-financed industrial access road that would serve Newell, the Commerce city park and the high school football stadium.

State Sen. Rick Littlefield, D-Grove, canceled a meeting that had been scheduled Friday to determine if the road would qualify for state money. He said he wanted some clarification of the situation involving Crawford's private company before the project continues.

Littlefield and Newell Coach spokesman Scott Lawson have said Crawford and former Commerce Mayor Phil Crosby approached them about requesting the road.

Lawson also has said it was Crawford who approached the company about doing the work, noting that Commerce could pay for up to about \$5,000.

Crawford has been leasing equipment for his private company, which was formed in March, from Keystone Equipment of Sand Springs, which also bids on county equipment purchases.

Crawford said at Monday's meeting that he was advised by David Anderson, assistant district attorney, "not to do business with companies that have contracts with the county."

Anderson later said that was not the case, repeating a statement he made last week that he had told Crawford "not to do business with companies that are in a competitive bidding relationship with the county."

During the commission meeting, Crawford said: "There aren't that many equipment suppliers in this area, and they all bid on county projects. You can't just go down to Sears or Wal-Mart and get a bulldozer."

Crawford also said that some members of his county road crew also are employees of Center Line Construction, "on weekends and their days off."

Crawford referred questions to his attorney, Ben Loring. Loring said in a separate interview that he had not examined all of the elements in the situation.

"I think Joe's hesitancy to say anything right now is because he is still trying to find out where the insurance adjuster stands on the loss of the bulldozer," Loring said. "He doesn't want to say anything that would jeopardize a settlement on the insurance."

Loring echoed Crawford's statement about leasing equipment from Keystone. "It's a very specialized type of equipment that is not readily available from other vendors," he said.

In an unrelated action, representatives of the state auditor's office were in Ottawa County on Monday to start an audit of all county offices. The audit was scheduled before the bulldozer accident prompted the questions about Crawford's roles.

Clarence McClain, supervisor for the auditor's office, and Tisha Carroll, an auditor from the Tulsa office, began working in county Treasurer Brenda Conner's office.

James Leake, County Commission chairman, said the state audit "is a routine thing. This is the first one we've had in three years, because of a shortage of personnel in the auditor's office."

He said the audit will cover the county's 1998-99 and 1999-2000 fiscal years. "They will look at every purchase order and every expenditure in each office, and determine if everything has been done by the book," Leake said.