

NEWS



The St. Augustine Airport, which is overseen by the St. Johns County Airport Authority. | St. Augustine Airport

The story behind criminal charges at St. Augustine Airport

By Noah Hertz

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Speaking with state investigators, staff from the St. Johns County Airport Authority spelled out a culture of clandestine meetings and conspiracy to change airport policies that ultimately led to criminal charges against three airport authority board members, court documents show.

The monthslong investigation by the State Attorney's Office resulted in charges against board Chair Reba Ludlow and members Dennis Clarke and Len Tucker, who are accused of violating Florida's Sunshine Law, which governs what elected officials can discuss in private.




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Prosecutors say the board members pressured staff to do what they wanted and ran the board from behind closed doors.

On top of his misdemeanor charge of violating public meeting laws, Tucker received an additional felony charge of witness tampering.

Ludlow and Tucker declined to discuss the case with *Jacksonville Today*, but Clarke agreed to speak. He said the allegations “are just not true.”

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The charges

Sunshine Law violations occur when elected officials have private conversations about matters they are required by law to discuss in the public eye.

The airport authority board is made up of five elected members who oversee St. Augustine's publicly owned general aviation airport. Because of that, private meetings between board members are heavily scrutinized.

The investigation into alleged Sunshine Law violations began in March after the airport authority's legal counsel, Douglas Law Firm, announced it would no longer work with the board.

In a letter to the board, attorney Jeremiah Blocker said his firm had an "ethical obligation" to withdraw services because of a pattern of Sunshine Law violations that Blocker had warned members of the board about.

Testimony from a number of airport employees, including former executive directors at the airport, indicate that board members regularly met in private for years, according to affidavits filed in the court cases.



Interim Executive Director Courtney Pittman told investigators he was a part of a number of meetings where Tucker, Clarke and Ludlow repeatedly talked about items that would later come up in public meetings. Pittman also said those board members pressured him to change policies and remove items from public meeting agendas.

In March, Ludlow publicly insisted, including to *Jacksonville Today*, that she was well aware of the state's public meeting laws. She called the accusations of lawbreaking "unsubstantiated rumors."

But testimony provided to the State Attorney's Office by airport staff indicate that the board members knew they were breaking the law by meeting in private, according to an affidavit supporting the charges. During one meeting in February, Pittman said the board members laughed off the idea of getting caught meeting in private.



The three St. Johns Airport Authority Board members criminally charged by the State Attorney's Office. From left: Dennis Clarke, Reba Ludlow and Len Tucker. | St. Johns Airport Authority

From Pittman's testimony to the State Attorney's Office: "Defendant Clarke said there was no need to worry, there is nothing anyone will do because it's just a slap on the wrist and a fine."

According to Pittman, Ludlow shared that the St. Johns County Sheriff's Office had "tried before," but "cannot get anything out of her."

Private meetings

Pittman's testimony to state investigators shed light on some of what Ludlow, Clarke and Tucker are accused of discussing in private.

Pittman claims he was part of several private meetings that involved discussion of another airport authority board member — Jennifer Liotta.

During a meeting last November, Pittman said Ludlow and then-recently elected Tucker instructed him to remove an item from the board's November agenda that Liotta had asked that the board discuss, affidavits show.

Pittman told investigators he removed Liotta's item from the agenda after Tucker told him "how things are going to work in the future."

Pittman claims Ludlow said she, Tucker and Clarke would run the board "for the foreseeable future."

Usage of the airport's hangars has been a hot topic for months, and Pittman told investigators that the future of his job became tied up with enacting policy changes Ludlow, Tucker and Clarke wanted.

Last December, Pittman said Ludlow and Tucker invited him out to lunch to discuss his becoming the permanent executive director of the airport. When Pittman became interim director last summer, *First Coast News* reported that he was the fourth person to lead the airport in just over two years.

During that meeting, Pittman alleges Tucker told him to end the airport's policy of inspecting hangars rented to private lessees.

"So, the message is," Pittman told investigators, "for the job, this is what you are going to do."

Pittman said he signed an agreement to adhere to the FAA's regulations to ensure the airport did not lose federal funding, but he told investigators that Tucker's reply to that was that it would be only "a slap on the wrist and a letter," according to the affidavit in Tucker's case.



Pittman told investigators that changing the board's policy around inspecting hangars repeatedly came up during the private meetings that should have been held in the public eye.

After Blocker and the Douglas Law Firm announced they would no longer work with the airport authority, Pittman says he came under fire for making that information public.

Ahead of the board's March 10 meeting, he included an item on the board's agenda to discuss Blocker's resignation and the allegations of Sunshine Law violations, but Pittman said Ludlow chastised him for the move.

According to Pittman's testimony to the State Attorney's Office, the board almost didn't discuss the law firm's withdrawal in public at all.

From the State Attorney's Office: "Defendant Clarke said the Douglas Law Firm needed to show proof of their assertions or be sued for defamation. Defendant Ludlow agreed in a taunting manner."

Witness tampering

In May, with the investigation into Ludlow, Clarke and Tucker well underway, Pittman's attorney, David Barksdale, contacted investigators to share that Pittman was shaken after an interaction he had with Tucker.

On May 10, Pittman said he received an invite from Ludlow to meet with Tucker at an Irish pub in Ponte Vedra.

From Tucker's charging affidavit: "Pittman stated upon his arrival at Fionn MacCool's Irish Pub, Defendant Tucker was waiting outside of the Pub, 'looking left and right as if he were looking for me.'"

Pittman alleged that Tucker joined him in his car, leaned in close, and said, "No one knew what we were talking about" during the lunch meeting where Tucker and Ludlow pressured Pittman to change the airport's hangar policy.

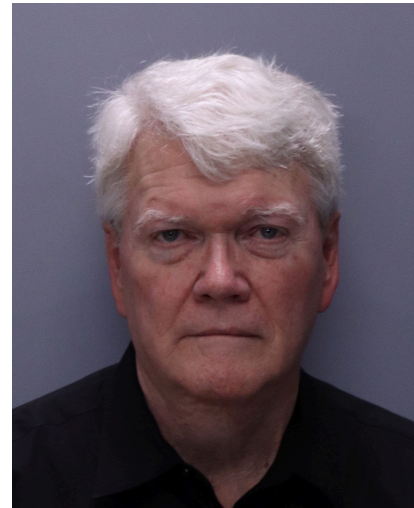


Pittman said Tucker said he was uncomfortable and not trusting anyone — keeping his phone on airplane mode, attempting to dodge a request by the state attorney to come in for an interview and, based on surveillance conducted by state investigators, arriving at the pub in a car that wasn't his own.

Tucker claimed he had no memory of meetings where he discussed airport policy with the other board members, and, Barksdale noted, “Pittman said he felt the conversation might become violent and said after some additional confrontation about testimony, Defendant Tucker abruptly exited the vehicle,” affidavits show.

While Ludlow and Clarke received only notices of their misdemeanor charges for violating Sunshine Law — which comes with a \$500 fine — Tucker received a third degree felony charge for witness tampering.

Tucker turned himself in to the St. Johns County Sheriff's Office last week and promptly paid his bond. The additional witness tampering charge carries a \$2,500 fine.



*St. Johns Airport Authority Board member
Len Tucker turned himself in after he was
charged with violating Florida's Sunshine
Law and witness tampering. | St. Johns
Sheriff's Office*

What comes next

With three of the five Airport Authority board members facing criminal charges, board member Jennifer Liotta says the only way to restore public trust in the airport is for Ludlow, Tucker and Clarke to resign immediately.

“These are serious criminal charges against a majority of the current airport board,” Liotta said in a statement to *Jacksonville Today*. “These three recently voted against my motion for the board to discuss an independent investigation into allegations against them specifically. This is a serious conflict of interest issue, and I believe their actions speak volumes.”

And while she isn't sure if all of the allegations are completely true, Michelle Cash-Chapman said she feels similarly.

“Should the allegations be true, I don’t think that that is the best way to represent the people of St. Johns County or our airport,” she said.

“Perception is everything, and when over half of us are being accused of being unethical, it hurts all of us and that’s very frustrating for me as an individual and a board member,” Cash-Chapman said. “A lot of us ran on transparency, and I don’t take that lightly.”

Accusations denied

In an interview with *Jacksonville Today* on Wednesday, Clarke said the allegations are “just not true.”

When asked about Liotta’s calls to resign, Clarke said Liotta is “highly conflicted.”

“She is not only a member of the board, but she is an owner of a major tenant at the airport. Decisions we make impact her business.”

While Clarke says he has not read through the State Attorney’s Office’s investigation, he believes that the entire investigation and the legal process that will follow is “very distracting.”

“It’s coming from people that have, in my opinion, an agenda,” Clarke said. “They’re trying to undermine the authority and really trying to overthrow an election is what it amounts to.”

The airport authority board’s next meeting is scheduled for 4 p.m. July 21. The board was originally scheduled to have a meeting on July 9, but that meeting has been canceled.
