



Moore denies power abuse

Poston says review of daughter's hiring was retaliation for op-ed

By Scott Barker
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Knoxville criminal defense attorney Bruce E. Poston alleges that Knox County Commission Chairman Scott Moore abused his power by ordering a review of the hiring of Poston's daughter to a position in the county's probation office.

Poston said Moore ordered the county auditor to conduct the inquiry in retaliation for an opinion piece Poston had written for the News Sentinel.

Moore denied the allegation Saturday, saying he was concerned about the possibility that the Probation and Pretrial Release Office had circumvented routine hiring practices.

In a Friday evening interview, Poston said Moore took offense at an opinion piece the News Sentinel published Dec. 12, 2005, in which he urged commissioners to disregard politics in selecting a replacement for retiring General Sessions Court Judge Brenda Waggoner.

Poston said Moore had been trying to make deals among commissioners to name Circuit, Juvenile and Civil Sessions Court Clerk Cathy Quist to Waggoner's post. Moore then would seek appointment to Quist's job, Poston said.

Moore said at the time that he would be interested in Quist's job if it became available. Commissioners eventually chose lawyer Jimmy Kyle Davis to finish Waggoner's term.

Poston, citing conversations with unnamed Moore associates, said his commentary prompted Moore to go after his daughter, Kelsey Lamb, an intern who was hired full time as a probation officer in September 2005. Lamb, who heads up the probation office, used the county's emergency hiring procedures to get her into the position.

"The day after the piece ran, (Moore) called and demanded an inquiry into her," Poston said.

Auditor Richard Walls said he couldn't recall any conversations with Moore but that his notes indicate he began the review Jan. 27, 2006.

"That's probably when we were asked to do a formal report," Walls said, adding that he was already looking into issues surrounding the probation office's handling of the contractor for its driving school for DUI offenders.

Moore denied Poston's claim that he immediately demanded a probe, saying he didn't ask for the review until he was contacted by a candidate spurned for the job that went to Lamb.

"There's nothing political about it," Moore said.

Moore said the county's emergency hiring process shouldn't be used to bypass normal hiring practices.

"The audit speaks for itself," he said.

Walls' findings were included in an audit finalized Feb. 8, 2006. While Walls wrote that Lamb followed proper procedures in hiring Lamb, he also wrote that "hiring an intern currently working in the (office) gave the appearance of favoritism."

He recommended using emergency hiring procedures sparingly in the future.

Poston acknowledged that two more highly qualified candidates applied for the job. But he disagreed that he showed the appearance of favoritism, saying he hired Lamb, who still works in the office, after discovering that one applicant had problems with a previous employer and another turned down the job.

Lamb's hiring is the only time he's used emergency procedures, Poston said. That's because, he explained, the caseload in his office was growing and she performed well as an intern.

"She had proven herself," Poston said. "I made the decision to hire Kelsey based on my knowledge of her capabilities."

Moore noted that, as a defense attorney, Poston has connections in the probation office. Poston countered that six members of Moore's family work for the county. Two of them — his wife, Lori Moore, and his nephew, Brandon Heck — were hired by the Knox County Sheriff's Office after Moore became a commissioner. Heck formerly worked for the probation office.

Poston, who once was a close friend of Moore's before recent political feuding, said he didn't know if the inquiry was politically motivated.

"That's a question for Commissioner Moore," he said. "I would hope it was for good public policy."

Walls said the probation office review is the only time he's ever been asked to look into the hiring of a single employee.

For Poston, it's personal. He said Moore "is nothing but an uneducated bully who embarrasses Knox County by being chairman of the commission. He

abuses his power. He goes after someone who is a great employee for the sole reason she is my daughter, and I wrote an editorial saying they should appoint the best person judge. If that was my sin, I want to keep committing it.”

Asked why he didn't come forward in 2006, when the review was under way, Poston said several friends who were running for office that year asked him to hold off because they feared a political backlash. He would not name the friends.

The controversy surrounding commission since the appointments of 12 people to replace officeholders ousted by a state Supreme Court ruling upholding term limits was another factor, he said.

“I am embarrassed that Knox County government is represented by him as Commission chairman. He has no sense of morality, no sense of ethics,” Poston said.

Moore appeared to take Poston's criticisms in stride.

“I've served Knox County for many, many years,” he said. “I spent 14 years in the Sheriff's Office, and I'm in my second term on Commission because I care about the people of Knox County. To personally attack somebody, if that's his style, he certainly has the right to do that.”

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