

### COUNTY RECORDS IRK REPORTER

(ATHENS, GA) An Athens newspaper reporter is protesting publication of documents obtained from Athens / Clarke County Government apparently linking him to the widening controversy surrounding a recent federal air service contract award.

Athens Attorney Hue Henry obtained the documents under the Georgia Public Records Act on behalf of GeorgiaSkies, which then posted them to the airline's web site.

Those documents include correspondence between Athens Banner-Herald Business Reporter / Associate Editor Don Nelson and Airport Manager Tim Beggarly, involving a multimillion dollar federal air service contract award. Among them is a document highly critical of GeorgiaSkies.

The Athens Banner-Herald subsequently published a series of similarly negative articles critical of the award-winning, 35 year old airline while the contract selection process was underway.

According to County documents, those articles not only influenced the Mayor's contract endorsement, but also prompted a puzzling series of decisions and reversals by local government officials involved with the process.

The documents contain no indication Beggarly was authorized by the Mayor or Airport Board to make statements to Nelson or other member of the media regarding the contract. There is no indication County Spokeswoman Sandi Turner was aware of Beggarly's activities or statements to the press.

Nelson's email decried publication of the County records as a "cut-and-paste" misrepresentation, accusing the airline of "fabrication."

Nelson also sought to distance himself from involvement with what the journalist described as any "conspiracy" by the Airport Manager or Board to influence the federal air service contract award.

But a recent federal decision overruling the County's endorsement of another company, and awarding that contract to GeorgiaSkies has some questioning the nature of Nelson's relationship with Airport management, The Banner-Herald's influence with local government officials, and accuracy of its reporting.

Banner-Herald Education Reporter Ryan Blackburn acknowledged criticism of GeorgiaSkies contained in articles he wrote for the newspaper was based entirely upon repetition of secondhand information from unknown sources.

It is not clear whether Blackburn requested any public documents to qualify statements by County officials and board members alleging problems with the airline, however, county records do contain examples.

Included is correspondence from a passenger complaining they were not allowed to board a GeorgiaSkies flight without identification. Federal transportation security officials, however, confirm the airline faces TSA sanctions and fines if it fails to verify passengers' ID.

Another document provided by the County is from a University of Georgia faculty member who complained about missing his flight during a weather delay at Hartsfield International. According to incident reports, the passenger left the gate area to find ice cream, then missed three separate boarding calls before GeorgiaSkies dispatched the flight without him.

The passenger then used his UGA title, letterhead and email account to make a series of threats against the airline if it did not capitulate to his demands for financial compensation. These included a threatened consumer boycott, as well as threats to defame the airline's reputation in the community, and damage its business relationship with UGA.

The County did not produce a letter of apology written by the same faculty member, after UGA administrators admonished his attempts to involve the University in disputes with personal service providers.

Other correspondence apparently authored by individuals with ties to UGA complained GeorgiaSkies was not reliable, after the airline cancelled flights due to weather. The Federal Aviation administration, however, has confirmed GeorgiaSkies is prohibited from operating under weather minimums specified by FAA.

Public records seem to indicate a disproportionate number of complaints received by the County were authored by individuals affiliated with, or employed by UGA.

The nonprofit Athens Airport Authority Board also appears to be comprised largely of UGA affiliates.

County documents indicate some elected officials and Airport Board members may have direct personal or professional associations with individuals identified as complainants by the public records release.

Airline records indicate most of the complaints provided by the County were never actually sent to the Airline.

Blackburn has confirmed he made no effort to contact GeorgiaSkies for his first article, affording the airline no opportunity to respond to rumored service issues published by the newspaper.

Blackburn was also forced to retract and modify his article after publication, when the Airport Board Chairman denied making statements attributed to him by the Banner-Herald. Blackburn made the correction, but then re-attributed the same negative statements about GeorgiaSkies to an anonymous source.

Blackburn also acknowledged he was unable to confirm the existence of alleged service issues with the United States Department of Transportation Office of Consumer Affairs, the federal agency with sole responsibility for air carriers and airline service complaints.

Omission of this information from Blackburn's articles led newspaper readers to conclude gossip published by the Banner-Herald about GeorgiaSkies was indeed fact.

In following weeks, the airline was battered with a barrage of negative publicity in the form of more articles and postings to the Banner-Herald's unmoderated reader comment web site and excerpts of its coverage by other media outlets via the Internet.

Nelson's email does not indicate whether he was involved with assigning the newspaper's Education Reporter to airport business news previously covered by Nelson, or whether he assigned, edited or had input to Blackburn's articles about GeorgiaSkies.

Mayor Heidi Davison continues to insist nobody on her staff did anything wrong, despite a federal Order vetoing her recommendation for the contract. In doing so, USDOT noted the company endorsed by her administration attempted to subvert federal procurement processes, and misrepresented facts in its bid.

Davison recently told the Banner-Herald, "I don't know of any actions that have been taken by the staff that were not proper and appropriate - nor would they."

The Mayor did not explain, however, why she wrote a letter supporting GeorgiaSkies, then abruptly reversed herself and endorsed its competitor just days later.

Davison also did not comment on communications from the Airport Manager to the airline prior to its contract bid, indicating no problems with GeorgiaSkies.

In an April, 2010 email to the airline, Beggarly wrote "According to our records, your first quarter enplanements are up 35% over this time last year, so something mus [sic] be going right."

Beggarly went on to express the Airport Board's continuing support for GeorgiaSkies. "As we mentioned when we recommended PW for the EAS subsidy, we believed then and we still do that you have the right business plan to make AHN-ATL work." Beggarly wrote.

In a statement to the Atlanta Journal Constitution published after the federal contract was awarded last October, Mayor Davison made yet another reamrkable turnabout. This time, conceding her administration made the wrong decision about GeorgiaSkies after all.

"DOT's decision "was obviously the right one because that company [GeorgiaSkies] was able to meet the requirements that were laid out by the Department of Transportation." Davison said.

Developing...