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Investigation handed off to the Texas Rangers

The investigation into the disposition of the old Coke County Juvenile Justice property has been handed to the Texas Rangers by 51st District Attorney Allison Palmer. The Ranger assigned the case is currently reviewing the actions of the Coke County Commissioners Court to see if there were any violations of criminal statutes. The Commissioners Court consists of Judge Roy Blair and Commissioners Bobby Blaylock, Wendell Lee, Gene Montgomery and Gaylon Pitcock.

The investigation is the result of concerns by local citizens over how Garrison General Contractors, LLC came to lease the facility with its 38 acres and the monetary relationship this company had with a former Coke County consultant, Michael Croft, who was reported to have handled all inquiries related to the property.

The consulting firm Stellar Solutions of Georgia was first hired by Coke County in 2009 to facilitate the re-opening of a prison in the old Coke County Juvenile Justice Center building. Their representative was welcomed with open arms by everyone because he offered hope for economic development and a boost to Coke County's bottom line.

From early 2009, Croft was given unfettered access and an office in the courthouse. The consultant worked closely with Coke County Judge Roy Blair and Coke County Sheriff Wayne McCutchen to reopen the facility as a prison and was instrumental in the GEO Group giving the facility back to Coke County in December of 2012. At the time this appeared to be a gift to Coke County, but would later prove to be an annual loss of approximately \$65,000 in tax revenue.

Early in 2013, it became extremely clear the Texas Jail Commission was not going to approve a new prison in this area and on April 17, 2013, the consulting relationship between Stellar Solutions of Georgia and Coke County was ended.

Instead of Stellar's representative leaving Coke County with the end of the Stellar/Coke County business

arrangement, Croft continued to maintain his office in the Courthouse for another full year.

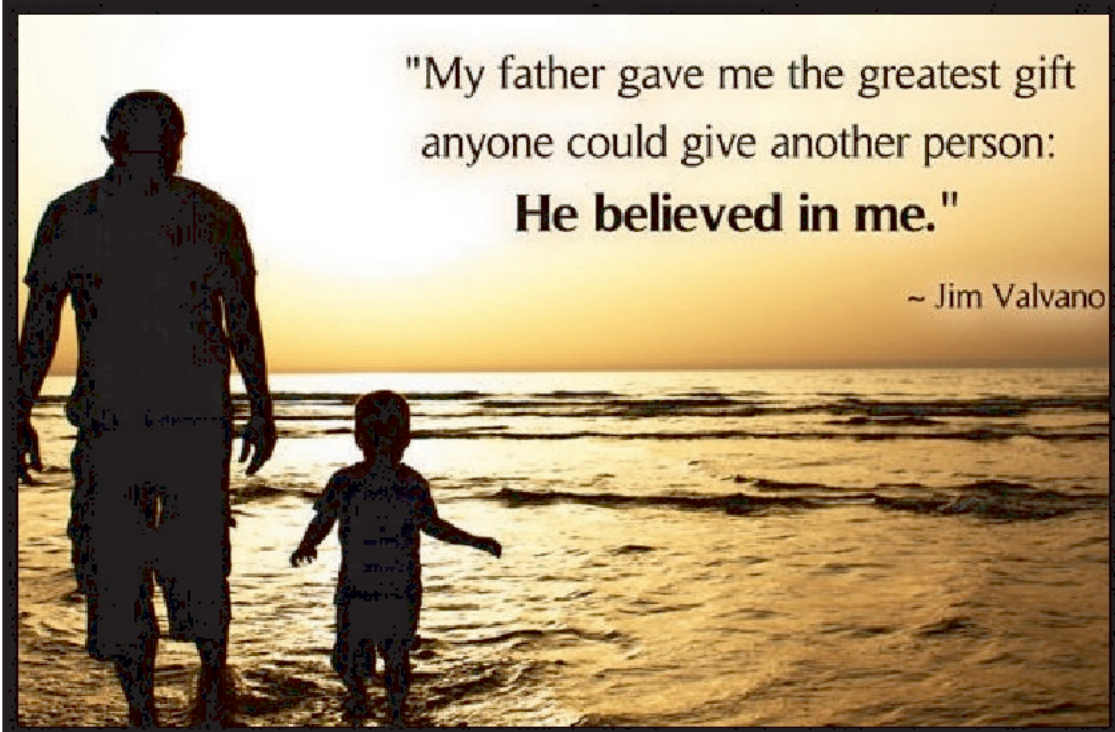
During a public meeting on Tuesday, May 12, 2014, at the Bronte Community Center to answer questions regarding this situation, Judge Blair stated that he had asked Croft to vacate the courthouse and turn in his keys upon learning of his employment with Garrison General Contractors, LLC. The timing of Judge Blair's request to Croft has been disputed by several sources, as well as the duties the representative performed for Coke County between April 2013 and April 2014.

It remains unclear how Judge Blair and the Commissioners believed Croft would be compensated for the year he remained in the Courthouse after the relationship was dissolved between Coke County and Stellar Solutions of Georgia.

Numerous mentions of Croft's actions related to the facility are included in Commissioners Court minutes from 2013. Legally, the Commissioners Court could have ordered an appraisal in the spring of 2013 following the Jail Commission's rejection. They then could have listed the facility at that price with a Multiple Listing Service (MLS) member real estate broker. Most people know MLS listings by the website Realtor.com. It is a nationwide database of listings readily available to potential buyers. Although this would have satisfied the "whole goal" of getting the facility back on the tax roll, the Commissioners Court chose another avenue.

In the spring of 2013, Judge Blair and Croft went to Colorado City where they met Bryan Garrison and his father at a workshop for the boom being created by Cline Shale. According to Judge Blair, he and Croft also met representatives from some "northern" company. Blair and Croft brought the Garrisons back to the Bronte facility and gave them a tour.

Judge Blair has stated that the Garrisons wanted to buy the facility for approximately \$200,000 and that the only way they could legally sell the property below its appraised value was to get a new appraisal



"My father gave me the greatest gift anyone could give another person:
He believed in me."

~ Jim Valvano

Happy Father's Day

and list it with an MLS broker. Therefore, the Commissioners Court couldn't legally accept the Garrison's offer. From the time the prison was handed back to Coke County, the value has dropped from over \$3.2 million to just over \$685,000.

The Court voted on July 22, 2013, to issue a Request for Proposals (RFP) to lease or lease/purchase the facility. The RFP was published in The Observer/Enterprise on August 16, 2013, containing a closing date of September 6, 2013. The RFP was also mailed to Garrison General Contractors, LLC and to the "northern" company. Since the RFP was not widely circulated and had only a 3 week window of opportunity not allowing sufficient time for many potential tenants/buyers to respond, Commissioners Court only received one proposal. The only proposal resulting from the RFP was from the Garrisons and it resulted in the lease signed by Judge Blair on April 21, 2014.

There have been many complaints voiced regarding this lease. Some of the complaints are listed below.

- The lease for this expansive property is very low, starting at \$1,125 per month and topping

out at \$3,625 per month.

- There is only a termination clause for the tenant and not the county.

- The Lease Agreement states the county will now list the property for sale with a MLS broker. Why now and not before?

- Because of this lease, the county will fail to locate a willing buyer other than the company who has the lease. What buyer would want to purchase a property tied up for 2 ½ years in a lease so low the buyer's monthly expenses on that property would not be met? What buyer would want to tie their capital up for 2 ½ years without being able to use the purchased property?

- Coke County may be liable for additional funds due to a specific clause in the lease which states "For all improvements whose contract price exceeds \$25,000, Tenant's contractor must provide payment and performance bonds each in the amount of 100% of the cost of the construction, with the Landlord (Coke County) named as a **co-obligee** on the bonds with the Tenant."

As the investigation progresses, The Observer/Enterprise will strive to keep citizens updated.

Harmon-Sparks

Reunion set for June 14

The 75th Harmon-Sparks Reunion will be held Saturday, June 14, 2014, in the Large Rec Hall in the Coke County Park in Robert Lee. A covered dish lunch will be served at 12:30 pm and visiting all day. Relatives and friends are invited.

For more information, call 325-453-2957 or 325-763-8857.

Paint Creek Cemetery Assn. to meet

The annual business meeting for Paint Creek Cemetery Association will be held on Saturday, June 14, 2014 starting at 9:00 am at the cemetery. For more information, contact Blake Box at 453-4330 or Joe Harmon at 453-2804.

Robert Lee Community Band Rehearsal

Robert Lee Community Band will have a rehearsal on Tuesday evening, June 17 at 6:00 pm in the high school band hall. If you played a band instrument in the past and want to join the fun, "Come on down". Enter the band hall through the door on the left side of the high school building-not the front door. If you have questions, please call Linda Bums at 473-0540 or Carolyn Long at 453-2383.