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## Palouse mayor admits to misusing WSU resources for outside duties

- **December 18th, 2009**
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By David Johnson of the Tribune

### Internal audit at university finds that Michael Echanove's actions violated WSU policy and Washington ethics laws

PALOUSE - Mayor Michael Echanove has acknowledged he misused Washington State University resources to conduct city business and other outside duties linked to volunteer civic positions he holds, according to WSU records.

Echanove, an administrator in WSU's Information Technology Services department, said he thought the activities were proper because they were not for profit, according to a report by the WSU Office of Internal Audit.

"Our review of evidence substantiated the assertion that University resources were misused," according to the report. "These uses are in violation of University policy on personal use of state resources and the Washington State Ethics laws."

A total of 1,289 personal phone calls over a 15-month period were made by Echanove from his WSU office that were not related to his administrative job, according to the report.

In addition, investigators found at least 146 e-mails sent or received on Echanove's WSU computer were associated with outside work activity.

The audit was triggered by a complaint, said Heather R. Lopez, director of internal audit. Steve McGehee, a former member of the Palouse City Council, confirmed he filed the complaint.

Potential disciplinary action, ranging from a reprimand to termination, is under consideration by Echanove's superiors, said WSU spokesman James Tinney. All ITS employees have also been required to attend state ethics law training as a result of the audit, according to records.

Echanove declined to comment about the audit report, but he criticized the Lewiston Tribune for calling him at his WSU office.

"I assume that you're taking me to task on it. I got to tell you, I thought it was really ironic that you called WSU and you left a note on a state machine about me using state resources. I thought, 'Boy that's kind of an interesting thing.' So I went and told the auditors about it.

"I want the state auditors to know..., like I say I can only assume you're going to take me to task, and yet you're calling me at work and leaving messages to call you.

"You call me on a state telephone to talk about it. That's just unbelievable to me."

In a Dec. 10 letter to Viji Murali, vice president for Information Systems at WSU, Lopez noted Echanove was provided a draft of the report and an opportunity to respond to the findings. "Though a response was not submitted in writing, Mr. Echanove has verbally acknowledged the veracity of the findings upon which our opinion is based."

In addition to serving as mayor in Palouse since 2003, Echanove is chairman of the Citizens Advisory Group of the Palouse Basin Aquifer Committee and a member of the Community Economic Revitalization Board. Echanove and his wife also own the Green Frog, a downtown Palouse business. He has been employed at WSU for 25 years, according to records.

"In an interview with (Echanove), it appears he had not considered his outside governmental appointments to be 'outside work' or outside activity on behalf of a non-WSU entity, mostly because they were work for another civic agency, not a for-profit," according to the report.

Investigators documented 1,892 calls to or from Echanove while he was in his office at WSU over the 15-month period. Of those calls, a total of 1,289 (68 percent) were identified as not related to official WSU duties, according to the report. A total of 459 calls were related to prohibited outside work activities, according to the report. Nearly half of those calls were for Palouse city business, according to the report, and total time of the personal phone calls was 64 hours.

A total of 186 e-mails found on Echanove's WSU computer between 2005 and 2009 were determined to be "non-work related," according to the report. Investigators also found Echanove "is fairly diligent about deleting e-mails on a regular basis, work-related as well as non-work related." WSU stores deleted e-mails on its server for just two weeks, the report notes.

"This makes it difficult to ascertain the true volume of e-mail activity that is non-work-related over the audit period," according to the report. Additional e-mail records were obtained, through the complainant, from other agencies after public records requests.

Out of the 186 non-work-related e-mails found, a total of 146 were determined to be associated with outside work - about half dealing with the city of Palouse, and the other half related to Echanove's volunteer committee work, according to the report.

The report notes WSU employees are allowed to use state resources for personal reasons under limited circumstances. But WSU policy prohibits use of state resources to engage in work or duties for private benefit or gain.

Echanove posted a copy of the WSU audit to the city of Palouse Web site, <http://www.visitpalouse.com/city.html>.

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