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5 legislators push for audit of Clemson

By TIM SMITH
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Five legislators who last year requested a probe into Clemson University's public services activities say they still want the Legislative Audit Council review after a state senator failed to have Clemson answer questions directly and avoid an audit.

The Legislative Audit Council in December postponed any action on the request by five House members for an audit to allow Sen. Mike Fair of Greenville to attempt to satisfy the legislators by arranging meetings between school officials and the lawmakers.

"They were not able to satisfy one another," Fair told The Greenville News. Fair is an ex-officio member of the LAC, the state's watchdog agency.

Clemson's Public Service Activities program operates a variety of research facilities and education centers throughout the state, as well as local extension offices and the 4-H program. The PSA last year had a total budget of about \$69 million, \$38 million of which came from the state's General Fund.

The five lawmakers are concerned, they wrote to the LAC, over "random" budget cuts to PSA, hefty salary raises to certain personnel and whether the school's extension services are being harmed by the "realignment" of funding to nonagricultural services, such as to the Restoration Institute, the North Charleston home of the Confederate submarine Hunley and the future home of a wind turbine test site.

One of the five lawmakers requesting the audit, Rep. Dwight Loftis of Greenville, alleged that the school lobbied the LAC and lawmakers in an attempt to prevent the audit.

"I think there is suspicion of a problem there with an agency that has more power over the audit council than the legislative body that set it up," he said. "Is there an ethics question there? I think maybe there is. When an entity to be audited says, 'No, we don't want to be,' maybe we need to look into that."

David Wilkins, the former U.S. ambassador to Canada who chairs the Clemson board, denied the school had tried to lobby the LAC or legislators over the issue. He said the

school's director of governmental affairs, who also serves as the trustees' executive secretary, talked to the LAC about audit procedures, when they would take it up and "what the options were."

Wilkins, a former House speaker, said he talked to Loftis twice about the issue.

"I expressed my view that Clemson had absolutely nothing to hide, that we would be happy to sit down with him and answer his questions fully," he said. "Of course, if he wanted to move forward with the audit and incur the expense of that, which is expensive in these dire economic times, then he certainly had the right to do that."

Loftis said: "My concern has been that Clemson is moving away from their land-grant mission."

Others requesting the audit are: Rep. Mike Pitts of Laurens, Rep. David Umphlett of Moncks Corner, Rep. Jeff Duncan of Clinton, and Rep. Mike Gambrell of Honea Path.

Wilkins said he doesn't believe an audit is necessary. He said the school also disagrees with some of the statements made in the letter requesting the audit.

Cathy Sams, a spokeswoman for Clemson, said the university wants to be transparent about its operations, including PSA.

"We have offered to meet directly with members of the Legislative Audit Council," she said in a statement, "so that we would have an opportunity to correct some inaccurate information that was included in some of the initial communication, and so that we could respond to all questions and provide all requested information without incurring the expense of a formal audit."

Loftis said he has been told the PSA's research centers have been told that they have to "earn their own way" because of the state's budget situation, that some PSA employees have received raises of 39 percent while others have been furloughed, and that pass-through funds have been frozen.

He said while the university has provided information in response to Fair's request, he has no way to verify it. He said, for instance, while the university has provided information that the Restoration Institute's funding is valid, he wants the LAC to look at the issue.

Pitts said his chief concerns are with the state's veterinarian office. He said the university provided information and answers to his questions, but he still wants the LAC to proceed with an audit.

"I would still like to see a review of Clemson PSA," he said. "Some of the questions I had are still in place. It just keeps coming to the surface that there are some problems at Clemson PSA, and I think an audit would shed a lot of light on it."

Philip Laughridge, chairman of the LAC, said the next step will be to ask Loftis to clarify the exact scope of his request and then to bring it to the board for a vote, probably in a couple of months.

However, former Rep. Tommy Hartnett, a member of the LAC, said he is opposed to having the LAC audit Clemson with the information that has been presented.

"From what I gathered, it was the sentiment of the members of the council that was really an administrative decision," he said of Clemson putting more money into some programs than others in PSA. "If they want to emphasize one thing over another, it's hard to say that's a subject for the Legislative Audit Council."

He also said the LAC has had its funds slashed dramatically, and other significant requests are pending. "I do not think I would vote to spend our very limited resources on that audit," he said.

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