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Ex-official alleges Clemson sold computers with private data

University denies allegations

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COLUMBIA — A former Clemson University official suing the university alleges in court documents it sold surplus computers with confidential personal information on them and

tried to conceal it from the public — allegations the school denies.

Eugene Troutman, a former Clemson board secretary, alleges that when Clemson officials learned computers had been sold with such information, they took "deliberate actions to

conceal this from the public."

Clemson officials denied they attempted to hide anything from the public.

Cathy Sams, a Clemson spokeswoman, said Monday the university doesn't know for certain if any computers were ever sold with sensitive information on them. She said a 2007

audit found some examples of computers being prepared for sale with such information.

She said those computers weren't sold once the auditors discovered the data still on the hard drives. Procedures have since been changed and all hard drives are removed and destroyed before sur-

plus computer equipment is transferred or sold from the university, a follow-up audit shows.

"We have a strong internal auditing division that did its job and learned that there were some flaws in our system," she said. "We made the recommended changes."

Troutman's lawsuit al-

leges he lost his job, in part, after he spoke out about "excessive" salary increases given to some university administrators. Troutman also alleges in his suit that increases in tuition and fees at Clemson weren't justified by cuts in state appropriations, and

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that trustees "hoarded" cash from tuition increases to build an unrestricted \$80 million fund.

The trustees and school officials have denied any wrongdoing. They said in court filings that Troutman improperly circumvented the trustees' policy manual by reorganizing the Internal Auditing Division and that he failed to establish and maintain effective working relationships with members of the board, faculty representatives and the administration.

Troutman alleges in court documents that when officials first learned of the issue of sensitive data being on Clemson computers that were being prepared for sale that Clemson board Chairman Bill Hendrix said, "This will be really bad publicity if this gets out."

Troutman alleges in the filing that Clayton Steadman, Clemson's general counsel, argued against reporting the problem if the school couldn't identify all the people affected, and the school didn't identify those affected.

Steadman told *The Greenville News* that he doesn't recall himself or Hendrix making such statements and that the school doesn't try to hide things.

"I don't have a recollection of making those statements to him and, of course, we don't conceal

information," Steadman said. "I hope people understand and believe that."

Hendrix said because the matter was an issue in a pending lawsuit, he couldn't comment.

Troutman's lawyers have argued that it was because of such problems with sensitive data and in accordance with university policy that he decided to save all the files on his Clemson laptop before turning it in and then had the hard drive "reimaged" to wipe it clean of previous files.

Clemson has since accused him in court documents of wrongfully copying and deleting files from the laptop, an accusation his lawyers have described as "baseless."

Troutman alleges in the motion that he learned in the fall of 2006 the school had sold some older used computers to a third party without removing personal data and sensitive information.

A university audit of the process for selling surplus computers at the school completed the following spring reported sampling several hard drives from surplus or scrap computers at the school and finding files and programs intact on one laptop, according to the audit.

"We viewed files containing personnel records of faculty members," auditor Jeff Rosenberger wrote in April 2007. "Name, address, Social Security number(s) and other personal data was observed."

Medical information

about a person also was included in a file, he wrote in the audit.

"We observed numerous other files that could be damaging to Clemson University if released to the public," the auditor wrote, without going into detail. A second laptop contained regulatory information about businesses. The auditors sampled some computers from a pile of 58 scrap computers and found several that still had their hard drives intact, according to the audit.

At the time, the school required that any computer being sold or recycled be checked by the department that used it and all sensitive information removed, according to the audit. The auditors said

the computers on which they found sensitive information had a form stating that all sensitive information had been removed.

"Failure to appropriately destroy data stored on hard drives could lead to the improper disclosure of confidential and personal data of students, employees, donors and others," the auditor wrote. "The risks, both financial and reputational, could be tremendous."

The auditors recommended that all hard drives be removed and either destroyed or rendered unreadable prior to leaving Clemson's possession. The school agreed, according to a copy of the audit. The school has since purchased and now uses a

hard drive crusher that destroys each drive in any computer placed in surplus. Clemson puts in surplus about 1,500 computers each year, according to auditors.

The school also agreed with other audit recommendations, one of which was to allow information technology personnel at

Clemson to help erase or render hard drives unreadable before transferring or surplusing the equipment, according to the audit.

Clemson now sends surplus computer equipment not sold for scrap to a state surplus warehouse, according to a follow-up audit.