

# County auditor fired in unanimous vote

Barnes lost support when he dismissed his assistant.

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**TAMPA** » Like a burr in a boot, Jim Barnes has been a continuing annoyance to Hillsborough County commissioners since they hired him as internal performance auditor three years ago.



Barnes

On Wednesday, the commissioners severed the unhappy relationship, firing Barnes and ordering him out of the Frederick B. Karl County Center under escort from security officers. The vote was unanimous.

Commissioner Kevin White, a former supporter who had voted against firing Barnes in the past, summed up the board's fatigue with the auditor's antics.

"I believe the whole debacle has been an embarrassment to the board and to this county government," White said.

Barnes could not be reached for comment.

Barnes' troubles started two months after his hiring in April 2007 when he asked for a raise.

Two years later, as the county was facing a \$110 million budget deficit, Barnes took a business trip to Las Vegas, costing taxpayers \$3,500. Before that, he had taken eight trips on the taxpayers' dime.

Commissioners faulted Barnes for his lack of production and questionable work habits. Commissioner Rose Ferlita once said Barnes' office had cost taxpayers \$2.2 million while producing just three audits.

Then in February, a peer review found that Barnes' work did not meet U.S. government

auditing standards.

"The list is endless, and at the bottom of it all is the fact that the credibility of Mr. Barnes is not diminished, it's nonexistent," Ferlita said Wednesday.

Barnes went down swinging, stridently defending his most recent report alleging that Office Depot overcharged the county by up to \$1 million. He disputed an audit of Office Depot by the clerk of circuit court's office that showed no overcharges.

But Barnes lost the remaining support he had with board members last week when he fired his only employee, assistant county auditor Billy Poulos, in an ugly scene that ended with security officers walking Poulos out of the county center.

The same fate awaited Barnes after White said he would provide the necessary fifth vote to fire the auditor. Acting county administrator Mike Merrill told commissioners Barnes' computer access was being blocked as they spoke and security officers were watching the auditor pack his belongings in his small office on the second floor.

Voters created the internal performance auditor position in 2002 as a way to increase efficiency in county agencies and to save taxpayers money. But the only other auditor to hold the post, Kathleen Mathews, was forced to resign after getting a poor evaluation and arguing with her employees.

The county's charter review board is close to putting repeal of the office on the Nov. 2 ballot. Board members who favor repeal say the office does work that could be handled by the clerk of court.

But county commissioners said Wednesday they favor the office, albeit without Barnes.

"He just happens not to be the guy," Ferlita said.

THE THURSDAY 5.20.2010  
TAMPA TRIBUNE  
and The Tampa Times

*Submitted with  
the Record  
by Charter Review  
Board Members,  
Gerald White  
(May 24, 2010)*