Tyler's reputation on the line

Ex-employees claim alcohol and drug use during reassessment

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WALHALLA — Two former Tyler Technologies Inc. employees are blowing the whistle about inappropriate and unprofessional conduct by some data collectors during Oconee's countywide reassessment.

The former employees, who spoke on condition of anonymity because of ties to the community, said they saw co-workers drinking and using drugs during working hours.

They also reported that training and supervision was lax, and that sometimes trainers were employees who themselves had about two weeks' experience under their belts.

Whistleblowers also said that supervisors often told them to "estimate, estimate, estimate," which, although required in appraisals, was apparently overdone during reassessment, according to sources.

The charges come amid reports by some property owners that they were taken aback by what they characterized as erratic behavior and spotty appearance on the part of data collectors who showed up at their homes to do appraisals.

However, one former Tyler employee contacted by The Journal, who spoke on the record, did not see evidence of unprofessional conduct by her co-workers.

"I had no complaints about my co-workers or the crew I worked with," Julie Gifford said. "I did not notice any unprofessional conduct."

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However, if the charges have merit, they raise questions as to whether they play any role in the mushrooming number of appeals that is approaching 6,000 filed to-date.

County Administrator Scott Moulder said at a recent public forum that the rate of adjustments that have been made because of challenges made to Tyler's appraisals exceeds 60 percent.

Moulder said he's heard of the ex-Tyler employees' allegations from information shared with him by Councilman Wayne McCall.

"We're not at liberty to comment about how this is being addressed," Moulder said.

Tyler was paid $1.8 million to do a mass appraisal of the more than 62,500 residential and commercial properties in Oconee.

Oconee required Tyler to carry professional liability insurance in the amount of $1 million as part of their contract.

Moulder was not the administrator when the deal with Tyler was arranged.

Calls and emails to Tyler officials have gone unanswered.

The Journal verified that the whistleblowers were indeed employed by Tyler. They provided The Journal with a Tyler employee handbook and a residential data collection manual for conducting appraisals of residential properties in Oconee.

The data collection manual states up front: "It should be recognized that the accuracy of the final appraisal, the assessed value, depends on the quality of work performed by the data collector."

The whistleblowers claim the company's axiom was not adhered to.

One source alleged personally seeing workers drinking alcohol inside the Brown Building in Walhalla where Tyler was temporarily headquartered.

"The county spent $1.8 million and this just isn't right," a whistleblower said. "Our county doesn't deserve this."

The two whistleblowers were interviewed separately and provided information independent of each other.

One source said there were set places on the lake where employees gathered for lunch, and both sources confirmed drug and alcohol use, particularly when field representatives would meet for lunch.

"The smell of alcohol alone would make you break out," a whistleblower said, adding, however, that he would not deem the drug and alcohol use he witnessed as "excessive."

'I just don't see how the assessment can be accurate," the source continued. "Lake values were brought down and interior values were pushed up."

The whistleblowers charged that critical judgment calls were made that were not based on market value.

"It was a 'neighborhooding' strategy, and the neighborhoods were not always the same," one of the sources said.

Journal Editor Brett McLaughlin contributed to this article.

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