

NEWS

Director quashed inquiry into No. 2

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When state troopers leveled charges of misconduct against the assistant director of the Ohio Department of Public Safety, the top boss and top cop began butting heads.

Col. Richard Collins, superintendent of the State Highway Patrol, strongly urged that Ohio's inspector general be brought in to investigate Assistant Public Safety Director George Maier.

However, Public Safety Director Henry Guzman declined to dig into the charges against his No. 2, ruling that there were no grounds to justify either an in-house or outside investigation of Maier.

Some troopers and officers whom Maier once commanded as a captain accused him of threats, intimidation, favoritism and creating a hostile workplace.

Memos obtained by *The Dispatch* show that Collins accused the director of mischaracterizing his stance on investigating Maier. Guzman had written that Collins had told him "there was nothing to these allegations."

Collins responded: "At no time during my June 10 conversation with you did I imply that there was nothing to these allegations ... or that no further action should be taken.

"To be clear, it is my recommendation" that the case be sent to Inspector General Thomas P. Charles, Collins wrote on July 8. "The allegations should not be considered baseless without an adequate investigation."

Collins also wrote that Guzman had compromised a potential investigation of Maier by allowing him to read and respond to the allegations against him. Maier denied wrongdoing.

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Guzman wrote to Collins on July 9 that he had consulted his chief lawyer and reviewed state policies and found that the charges against Maier did not rise to a level requiring investigation. Guzman wrote that he considered the matter closed.

Collins, Maier and Guzman, the former public-service director in Columbus and public-safety director in Cleveland, declined requests for interviews. Charles said he could not comment.

Gov. Ted Strickland said yesterday that he will review the case. "Nothing has been brought to my attention so far that would suggest anything other than an internal (agency) disagreement," the governor said.

Department of Public Safety spokesman Thomas Hunter called the complaints against Maier "the latest in a series of false allegations" in a "smear campaign" to discredit department administrators. He declined to expand on his remark.

David Sturtz, a retired patrol major who served as Ohio's first inspector general from 1988 to 1994, said Guzman should have followed Collins' advice to call in the inspector general.

"I support Col. Collins' request for the IG to step in, in order to be transparent and not make it look like they're covering up something," Sturtz said. "That's too close to home. A third party has to look into that."

The midsummer exchange of memos between Guzman and Collins followed an investigation of Lt. Troy Johnson, who ultimately was demoted to trooper for violations of patrol policy.

The probe began when Maier called one of Johnson's superiors at the Jackson post on Jan. 19 and 22. Maier relayed accusations that some employees claimed Johnson had created a hostile workplace and might have committed crimes.

Maier was Jackson-district commander as a captain until he retired last year to become assistant public safety director.

During the investigation of Johnson, investigators fielded complaints that Maier had abused his rank both as a captain and assistant director, records show. Johnson and Maier long had been at odds, investigators were told.

Some troopers and the district's new captain, Paul Pride, told investigators that Maier had "protected" and "empowered" a group of patrol employees and friends who were upset they were being held accountable for their performance.

Johnson's duties included supervising civilians who weigh trucks for load-limit violations and conduct safety inspections. Because of their friendship with Maier, the inspectors were unaccountable to superiors, some troopers and officers said.

The employees were upset when Maier retired and their schedules were changed from a four-day to a five-day work week, and Pride ended Maier's practice of allowing inspectors to commute to and from home in a state van.

The employees said they spoke with Maier about their complaints over beers on Jan. 27.

Records show an exchange with Lt. Lee Darden in which Maier reportedly told the Chillicothe post commander: "You mess with my guys; I'm going to mess with you."

The patrol recommended that Johnson be busted to sergeant, but Guzman decided on a demotion to trooper, Hunter said. Johnson said he accepted responsibility for his actions but did not warrant such "outrageous punishment" after being "targeted" by Maier for acts that occurred two to three years ago.

"It's very disappointing the allegations against Maier were not investigated," Johnson said, adding that more interviews and more evidence would have altered the findings against him.

Johnson was cleared of creating a hostile workplace and any criminal conduct but was charged with failure to meet command responsibilities, not complying with orders and making false statements.

The patrol found that he purchased an item at a state auction and sold it on duty, had an on-duty patrol employee move furniture at his home and was aware that employees falsified truck inspections to reflect that he had performed them. He disputed knowledge of the inspections in his name.

Dispatch reporter Mark Niquette contributed to this story.

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