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GBI Investigating Financial Discrepancies in Bulloch County Public Works Contracts



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The Georgia Bureau of Investigation (GBI) has launched an investigation into financial discrepancies within the Bulloch County Public Works Department, focusing on contracts related to disaster cleanup funding. The investigation, requested by the Ogeechee Circuit District Attorney **Robert Busbee** on February 28, 2025, is regarding to financial discrepancies related to invoices and bidding procedures within the Bulloch County Public Works Department, according to **Nelly Miles**, Director, GBI Office of Public & Government affairs.

At the March 4, 2025, Bulloch County Board of Commissioners meeting, public concerns regarding the county's continued reliance on emergency spending were front and center. **Cassandra Mikell** of the **Bulloch Action Coalition** raised questions about the \$500,000 spent on hauling materials such as dirt, rock, and crusher run by **J.L. Derriso Trucking** and **Sand Creek Construction**.

Mikell argued that after six months of repairs, the county should no longer be classifying these expenditures as emergency spending and demanded greater transparency in the invoicing process. She pointed out that invoices from Sand Creek Construction lacked essential details such as load sizes, delivery dates, and drop-off locations, providing only broad descriptions and total hours worked.

"At this point, it doesn't seem like an emergency," Mikell said. "So when does emergency spending on no-bid contracts end?"

The discussion took on added weight with the revelation that Sand Creek Construction is owned by the brother of Bulloch County Commissioner **Toby Conner**. Conner, acknowledging the conflict of interest, recused himself from voting on matters related to the company.

Public Works Director **Dink Butler** provided a detailed defense of the county's truck rental process. He explained that in the aftermath of Tropical Storm Debby and Hurricane Helene, Public Works rented trucks from multiple companies, including **J.L. Derriso Trucking**, **Sand Creek Construction**, **Carlton Gaines**, and **D&H Trucking**, to help with extensive dirt road repairs.

Butler emphasized that the Board of Commissioners had previously directed Public Works to prioritize local businesses, leading to longstanding relationships with companies such as Sand Creek Construction. He also noted that many contractors declined to assist due to high demand in the construction industry, but those willing to help were utilized.

Regarding costs, Butler stated that rental rates were competitive with industry standards, with tandem dump trucks at \$105 per hour, a rate he said was consistent with asphalt and construction companies in the region. He also assured the commissioners that all truck activity

was logged and verified daily to ensure eligibility for FEMA and GEMA reimbursement, which could cover up to 85% of the costs.

Butler acknowledged concerns about invoice clarity and agreed that improvements could be made, but defended the integrity of his department's financial oversight processes.

Commissioner Toby Conner delivered a passionate defense of Public Works and the local contractors involved in storm recovery efforts. He noted that J.L. Derriso Trucking and Sand Creek Construction pulled their trucks off other jobs two days before the storm to help the county, emphasizing their dedication to the community.

Conner criticized what he called unfair public scrutiny, stating that contractors had stepped up to serve the county in a time of need and that invoice concerns could be addressed without resorting to public criticism. He argued that these businesses are assets to the county, similar to firefighters, law enforcement, EMS, and public works employees.

Mikell also raised concerns over the growing costs of disaster cleanup contracts. She noted that a debris removal contract that initially started at \$3 million has now ballooned to \$13 million.

"So why are we continuing an already bad contract?" she asked, urging the commissioners to reconsider additional payments until more documentation is provided.

During the meeting, the commissioners approved an additional \$3 million for storm recovery efforts, bringing the total cleanup funding to \$13 million.

The Growing Scope of the Cleanup Effort

Public Works Director Dink Butler and Assistant Director **Robert Seamans** provided a critical update on the ongoing Hurricane Helene debris removal process, emphasizing the unprecedented scale of the cleanup and the financial urgency behind the additional funding request.

Initially, county officials estimated that 250,000 to 300,000 cubic yards of debris would need to be removed. However, the reality has far exceeded those projections, with over 420,000 cubic yards and counting now being processed. The cleanup effort is about 85% complete, but with more debris still being cleared, the county has already obligated \$9 million of the previously approved \$10 million in funding. To finish the job, Butler requested an additional \$3 million, warning that without it, cleanup efforts could stall.

The financial structure behind this funding is also critical. Initially, FEMA and GEMA provided a

90-day, 100% reimbursement period, which was later extended to 120 days, covering all costs during that time. However, that reimbursement window closed on February 4, meaning that moving forward, FEMA will only reimburse 75% of costs, leaving local governments responsible for the remaining 25%, potentially a \$500,000 to \$1 million burden for Bulloch County.

In an effort to ease this financial strain, Governor Kemp has petitioned the General Assembly for state funds to cover an additional 15% of the county's share. If approved, this would restore full reimbursement through March 24, ensuring Bulloch County doesn't have to pull from local taxpayer dollars.

Butler also explained that because of the sheer volume of debris, the county was able to justify an \$11.8 million funding request. Of that, \$5.9 million is set to be distributed within the next 30 days, with additional costs requiring further justification through a monitoring company.

Challenges in the Cleanup Process

Despite efforts to streamline operations, Butler acknowledged that the cleanup process had taken longer than expected, due in part to widespread misuse of storm debris removal services. Some citizens and contractors took advantage of the cleanup, using it as an opportunity to dispose of non-storm-related debris, further increasing costs and extending the timeline.

Additionally, some debris removal contractors failed to follow protocol, leaving waste in unauthorized areas rather than designated disposal sites. Without the manpower to monitor every road daily, the county had limited ability to enforce compliance.

However, Butler emphasized that all contractors are being monitored by a third-party company, as required by FEMA, to eliminate fraud and ensure accountability. While there have been disputes over debris volume calculations, the county has worked diligently to keep operations moving and maintain compliance.

"A First-of-Its-Kind Cleanup for Bulloch County"

Seamans provided further insight, explaining that this is the largest-scale cleanup effort Bulloch County has ever undertaken. Unlike past storms, the county has never needed to bring in outside contractors and monitoring agencies at this level, making this a learning process for everyone involved.

Seamans stressed that early damage assessments vastly underestimated the true extent of debris, which more than doubled initial projections. While returning to the Board of

Commissioners for more funding was not ideal, he reiterated that the county was monitoring every aspect of the cleanup closely and that the funding request was necessary to finish the job properly.

Despite setbacks, Butler and Seamans emphasized that Bulloch County has made significant progress in storm recovery and is working toward a full cleanup while maximizing federal and state funding opportunities to reduce the financial impact on local taxpayers.

GBI Investigation and Next Steps

While county officials defended their handling of contracts, the GBI investigation has added further scrutiny to the situation. Agents reportedly seized documents last week as part of the inquiry into financial discrepancies and bidding procedures.

As of noon on March 10, the Ogeechee Judicial Circuit District Attorney **Robert Busbee** responded through his Chief of Staff **Lindsey Gribble** that they have "no comment on this matter and will not be providing any statements at this time."

Bulloch County Board of Commissioners Communications Director **Dal Cannady** stated, "Last week, we were contacted by the Georgia Bureau of Investigation's Statesboro office with questions regarding our Public Works Department's recent use of an independent contractor. We are fully cooperating with the GBI in this matter. Because their investigation is open and ongoing, it would be inappropriate on our part to say anything further."

Approved Motions from the Bulloch County Board of Commissioners Since Hurricane Debby in regards to Sand Creek LLC, Derriso Trucking

It is important to note that Commissioner Toby Conner recused himself in each of the Sand Creek motions, due to a conflict of interest in his brother being the owner.

August 14, 2024

9. Approve and ratify Sand Creek Construction hauling service

Public Works leased trucks from Sand Creek Construction to aid in road repairs due to Debby, from Aug. 26th to Aug. 30th, at a cost of \$17,066.25.

September 3, 202

13. Motion to approve and ratify the use of J.L. Derriso Trucking for rock hauling services due to Tropical Storm Debby

During storm Debby, Public Works brought in J.L. Derriso Trucking to help haul extra tonnage of rock to fix roads. Between Aug. 12-16 they did approximately 48 loads at a cost of \$28,754.27.

14. Motion to approve and ratify the use of J.L. Derriso Trucking for rock hauling services due to Tropical Storm Debby

Public Works brought in J.L. Derriso Trucking with storm Debby to haul additional tonnages of rock for road repairs. During the week of Aug. 19th - 23rd they carried 54 loads of material, totaling 1,327 tons, from Augusta at a cost of \$33,179.25.

October 5, 2024

2. Approve and ratify the use of Sand Creek Land Construction hauling

Public Works used Sand Creek Land Construction to haul rock and dirt to road repair sites from Debby. For the week of Sept. 23 - Sept. 30 their rate was \$18,496.25.

December 4, 2024

6. Approve and ratify hauling services for the week of November 18 - November 22, 2024, from Sand Creek Land Construction

Public Works had Sand Creek Land Construction hauling additional rock to the BCPW yard on the week of Nov. 18 - Nov. 22, at a cost of \$23,310.00. Their services are aiding in the continued repairs using the Debby emergency fund.

7. Approve and ratify hauling services for the week of November 18 - November 22, 2024, from J.L. Derriso Trucking

Public Works had J.L. Derriso Trucking hauling additional rock from Augusta to the BCPW yard on the week of Nov. 18 - Nov. 22, at a cost of \$32,292.75. Their services are aiding in the continued repairs using the Debby emergency fund.

8. Approve and ratify hauling services for the week of November 11 - November 15, 2024, from J.L. Derriso Trucking

Public Works had J.L. Derriso Trucking hauling additional rock from Augusta to the BCPW yard on Nov. 8 and the week of Nov. 11 - Nov. 15, at a cost of \$32,865.75. Their services are aiding in the continued repairs using the Debby emergency fund.

December 17, 2024

10. Approve and ratify the use of Sand Creek Land Construction for hauling services for the weeks of November 25 - 27 and December 2 - 6, 2024.

Public Works had Sand Creek Land Construction hauling rock, for the week of Nov. 25 - Nov. 27, at a cost of \$17,587.50. Their services are aiding in the continued repairs using the Debby emergency fund.

11. Approve and ratify the use of J.L. Derriso for hauling services for the week of December 2 - 4, 2024.

January 7, 2025

Ratification of hauling service from J.L. Derriso for December 16 - 20, 2024.

January 27, 2025

3. Ratify hauling services from Sand Creek Land Construction for the week of December 16 - 20, 2024.

Public Works had Sand Creek Land Construction hauling material, for the week of Dec. 16 - Dec. 20, at a cost of \$22,995.00. Their services are aiding in the continued repairs using the Debby emergency fund.

February 5, 2025

5. Approve and ratify the use of Sand Creek Land Construction for hauling services the week of January 13 - January 17, 2025.

Public Works had Sand Creek Land Construction hauling material, for the week of Jan. 13 - Jan. 17, at a cost of \$16,590.00. Their services are aiding in the continued repairs using the Debby emergency fund.

6. Approve and ratify hauling services from J.L. Derriso Trucking from January 8 - January 17, 2025.

Public Works had J.L. Derriso Trucking hauling additional rock from Augusta and Warrenton pits to the BCPW yard during Jan. 8 - Jan. 17, at a cost of \$17,255.00. Their services are aiding in the continued repairs using the Debby emergency fund.

Below is a link to the Bulloch County Commissioners meeting held on March 4, 2025.

Here are some important timestamps:

- Cassandra Mikell's statement: 1:29:45
- New business/Public Works Director Dink Butler's response: 1:52:40

- Commissioner Toby Conner's response: 2:02:42
- Assistant Public Works Direct Robert Seamans: 2:07:37
- Dink Butler 2:10:38

Bulloch County Board of Commissioners Meeting - March 4, 2025 5:30PM



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