

Working With The Media

Moderated by:

Lyndon S. Remias, City Auditor

May 11, 2018



PANEL MEMBERS

Tim Eberly – Virginian Pilot



Jason Marks –WAVY-TV 10



AUDITORS AUDIT, CORRECT?

After 14 months, Portsmouth auditor has yet to audit

Tim Eberly
Jun 19, 2014



Hyunsoo Leo Kim | The Virginian-Pilotleo.kim@pilotonline.com
Portsmouth City Auditor Jesse Andre Thomas is photographed Monday, June 16, 2014.



PORTSMOUTH

The need for a sharp and independent mind to scrutinize Portsmouth's city departments called the City Council to action two years ago.

The council created the position of city auditor, someone to ferret out waste, fraud and abuse, and make the city run more efficiently.

Council members hired Jesse Andre Thomas in April 2013.

Fourteen months have passed since Thomas took the job. He has not yet released any audits, large or small. The Virginian-Pilot has learned. Nor has he submitted a key document to the City Council for approval - required in his job description - that lays out what audits he plans to conduct each year.

"That is certainly unacceptable," Councilman Bill Moody said. "I would say my expectation would be that



LET'S TALK



ICYMI: TOP STORIES

- 1 Serial pooper who defecated at school field "on a daily basis" turns out to be superintendent, cops say
- 2 MacArthur Center food court loses restaurant after 2-year stint
- 3 This SEAL war dog knew no fear. His disappearance 50 years ago was a mystery - until now.
- 4 Police say man stole and crashed ambulance in Virginia Beach. He admitted drinking a "ton."
- 5 What happened to Prince, a pioneering SEAL war dog? We finally have an answer.



Councilman Danny Meeks said Thomas has had plenty of time to do two or three audits.

"We ain't got nothing," Meeks said. "I ain't got nothing as a resident."

However, Meeks added, the council deserves some of the blame. He said the council hasn't done a good job overseeing Thomas and directing him to do specific audits.

Many municipalities create audit committees to oversee city auditors. Portsmouth does not have one.

"We both have to share some responsibility," Meeks said. "But he's getting paid \$90,000. He should be searching and uncovering and doing different things."

Thomas, who makes \$92,700 a year, declined this week to comment on the council members' concerns.

"I don't have any response to that," he said. "They are the council and I don't have any comment."

Three other cities in South Hampton Roads have city auditor's offices: Norfolk, Virginia Beach and Chesapeake. Suffolk does not.

Virginia Beach's auditor, Lyndon Remias, said he generally expects two large-scale audits and two smaller audits each year from the auditors on his staff. Remias submits an audit plan each year to an audit committee.

The city auditors in Norfolk and Chesapeake say their offices focus mainly on large-scale audits of entire city departments, which can sometimes take more than a year to complete.

When Chesapeake City Auditor Jay Poole started his job in 1991, it took him eight months to complete his first audit, which he described as large in scale and scope.

By most accounts, Thomas hasn't been working on a large-scale audit. If he is, he hasn't disclosed that to the City Council, with whom he met on Monday for his annual review, or The Pilot.

In March, he gave the council a summary of his work. It included two projects that appear to be smaller in scope. One is an audit that he says is almost complete pertaining to the operation of Willett Hall, a city-owned performing arts center. The other is a review of a contract with a hotel.

The Virginian-Pilot
PilotOnline.com

PASSING THE BLAME

Portsmouth auditor blames leaks for lack of results

Tim Eberly
Sep 28, 2014



Bill Tiernan | The Virginian-Pilotbill.tiernan@pilotonline.com
Portsmouth City Auditor Jesse Andre Thomas sitting in the audience Tuesday, Sept. 23, 2014 during the City Council meeting. Several speakers criticized members for retaining Thomas.



PORTSMOUTH

Auditor Jesse Andre Thomas told City Council members that information leaks have prevented him from producing his first audit since starting work in April 2013, according to a secret audio recording obtained by the newspaper.

Thomas contended that leaks compromised his investigation, specifically mentioning information given to The Virginian-Pilot. He failed to explain who leaked what information and how it harmed his audit of entertainment venue Willett Hall, according to a recording of Monday's closed-session council meeting.

In its coverage of the auditor, The Pilot has reported that Thomas was auditing Willett Hall – information Thomas himself offered in a May interview – with no additional details about the probe.

Although none of it has been published in the newspaper, the scant information obtained on the Willett Hall audit by The Pilot has come either from Thomas or Freedom of Information Act requests.

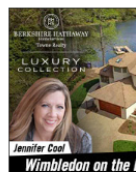


LET'S TALK



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2. MacArthur Center fo... restaurant after 2-ye...
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Thomas also has claimed since February that the Willett Hall audit was all but complete – four months before The Pilot first mentioned that the audit was in the works.

The Pilot obtained a copy of the closed-session recording from a council member who provided it on condition of anonymity.

The roughly 90-minute recording reveals the rationale of some council members who have publicly declined to explain why they retained Thomas. It also illustrates Thomas' defense of his performance over the past 17 months – and the work he presented to the council to save his job. Thomas received a raise in July, as did all city employees, and now makes \$95,481 per year.

During Monday's closed session, council members discussed Thomas' performance over a 90-day probationary period. But talk often veered to concerns over negative media attention. Mayor Kenny Wright repeatedly expressed distrust of city staff members. He argued that The Pilot's coverage has been manipulated by city employees to keep Thomas from uncovering fraud, waste and abuse at City Hall. Meanwhile, the most sensitive issue Thomas described to council members involved a \$3,000 discrepancy in ticket sales at Willett Hall.

Councilman Danny Meeks, who told The Pilot two weeks ago that he wanted Thomas fired, alternately defended and criticized the auditor during the closed session. He also focused on the newspaper's coverage of the auditor, advising Thomas not to talk to a Pilot reporter because "that's how it all started."

In the end, five council members – including one who left the meeting early, his colleagues said, to attend a campaign forum – put their support behind the auditor. Three of those – Wright, Meeks and Vice Mayor Paige Cherry – live in the same gated subdivision as Thomas.

Cherry, who only briefly attended the meeting and left through a side door, lives two doors from Thomas in the same cul-de-sac.

Only one council member, Bill Moody, advocated to fire Thomas. Councilwoman Elizabeth Psimas, who also had said she wanted to let Thomas go, was attending an out-of-state funeral on the day of the meeting.

Moody stormed out of the meeting when it became clear that other members supported Thomas.

"I cannot tolerate somebody not doing their damn job," said Moody, who can be heard repeatedly slamming his hand on the council table. "And you can't tell me we haven't given him time. We've given him way too much time. That's why this council is in hot water over it. To bring this work here, way over a year after he's been here, to me, is too little, too late."

Moody referred to an incomplete audit report that Thomas presented to the council Monday evening.

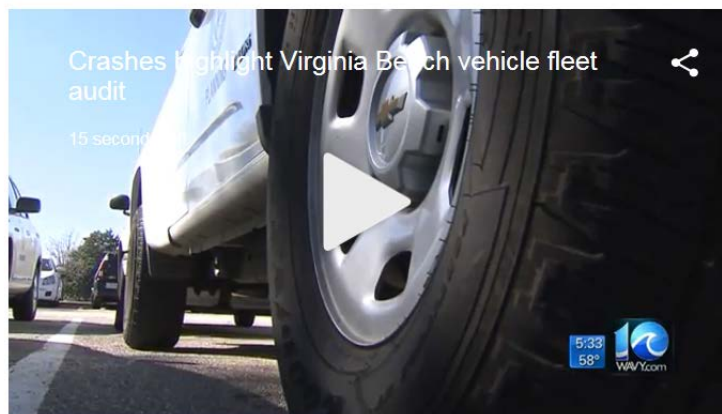
The Virginian-Pilot
PilotOnline.com

CITY VEHICLES

Crashes highlight Virginia Beach vehicle fleet audit

By: Jason Marks

Updated: Feb 20, 2017 05:54 PM EST



VIRGINIA BEACH, Va. (WAVY) - For the first time, the Virginia Beach vehicle fleet has been audited. The report looked at how city vehicles are used and how money could be saved.

"We like to look at areas we haven't previously," said Virginia Beach City Auditor Lyndon Remias.

One of those areas in Virginia Beach is its fleet of vehicles.

"At any given time, there are 300 to 400 just general-use vehicles," Remias added.

Read the audit

There are specialty vehicles, too, including fire trucks, police cars and snow plows. The total number of city-owned vehicles is in the thousands.

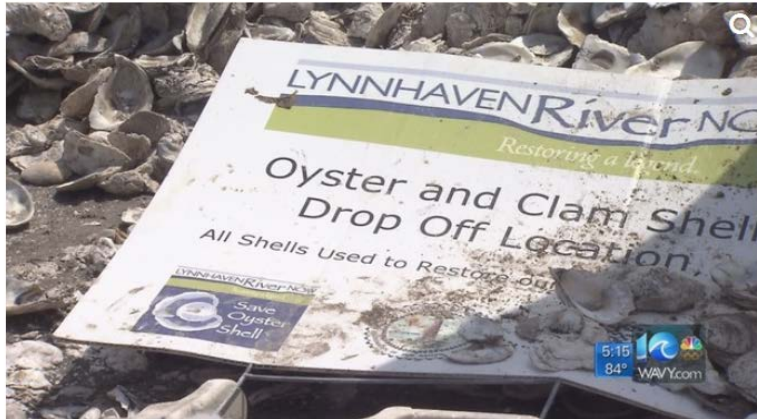
The audit found in the past three years, 1,116 city vehicles were repaired after crashes. The total cost: \$1,953,088 in taxpayer money. It was also found that \$62,207 was due to neglect and abuse by city employees -- something the auditor says needs to stop.

OYSTER RESTORATION PLAN.. WHAT PLAN?

VB audit says city paid \$640k for non-existent oyster plan

By: Jason Marks

Updated: May 02, 2016 07:42 PM EDT



VIRGINIA BEACH, Va. (WAVY) - Questions are arising after the latest audit report from Virginia Beach. The City Auditor says the city has paid more than \$640,000 for a **oyster restoration plan** that doesn't exist.

"There is just isn't a plan in place," said Virginia Beach City Auditor Lyndon Remias.

The plan should be part of the Oyster Heritage Program. The program was created to keep the Lynnhaven River and its oyster population healthy.

The city pays \$30,000 a year to the non-profit group Lynnhaven River Now to collect shells, educate watermen and restaurants and redistribute shells back into the river. Remias says council was under the impression all three were happening.

"There could be some misconceptions that the funds that are being appropriated are going to be utilized for something that it is not being utilized for, which is putting the oysters back into the Lynnhaven," Remias added.

Remias says shells have been piling up and collecting dust at the city dump for more than six years.

"At an early glance, it looks like some internal controls were not in place that would adequate," said Virginia Beach Deputy City Manager Doug Smith.

The city manager's office is now trying to figure out why a plan was never put on paper, and why the pile of shells is growing.

"You have to do is figure out what's real and what's not," Smith added. "What kind of controls are in place? What's not in place? We are working through that process."

Document: Letter from Virginia Beach's city manager

Karen Forget, Executive Director with Lynnhaven River Now, says there are reasons why the pile has not moved in six years. Forget tells 10 On Your Side the last time they built an oyster sanctuary was six years ago.

"It takes time to accumulate enough shells to do a sanctuary," Forget said. "We need about an acres worth."

The plan is to use the shells next spring for a new oyster sanctuary. Forget said Lynnhaven River Now is in the process getting the proper permits.

She also says the shells have to be out in the elements for 18 months before they can be put back in the river.

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Opening remarks Questions & Answer Session

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