

5/4/2014 - SUNDAY

NEW DETAILS: GOV. PERRY INVESTIGATION

Lehmberg successor was talking

Perry

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interviews with people either directly involved in the discussions or who have intimate knowledge of them. Most of those sources asked not to be identified because of the ongoing criminal investigation into Perry's conduct.

Perry apparently had a more prominent role in the political standoff prior to his June 14 veto of \$7.5 million in state funds over two years for the Public Integrity Unit — which investigates ethics complaints against state officials — in Lehmberg's office.

Indeed, the governor's participation in a continued push to remove Lehmberg after the veto appears limited — if he participated at all. That effort, instead, originated with a few county officials who went to Perry representatives to try to negotiate a deal for the restoration of the money in exchange for Lehmberg's resignation under more specific and agreed-upon terms.

"I said, 'Why don't we try to reach out to somebody in the governor's office to see if there is even a chance of re-looking at this thing to determine if there is a way we can get this paid for,'" said Travis County Commissioner Gerald Daugherty, a Republican who participated in talks with Perry representatives after the veto.

In the end, Lehmberg rejected all efforts to force her to step down. She had already announced that she wouldn't seek re-election when her term expires in 2016. And separately, after the high-level talks concluded without an agreement, she prevailed in a civil lawsuit that sought to remove her from office.

The state didn't restore the money, and county commissioners later helped fund the operation of a much smaller Public Integrity Unit.

The high-level conversations, which unfolded over several weeks last summer, will likely take center stage



Gov. Rick Perry signs bills on June 14, 2013, after the regular 2013 legislative session. He also vetoed funding for the Travis County District Attorney's Office Public Integrity Unit that day. The watchdog group Texans for Public Justice subsequently sought an investigation into whether Perry's threat broke state laws against abuse of office, official oppression, coercion of a public servant and bribery. RALPH BARRERA / AMERICAN-STATESMAN

ing his constitutional veto authority and that Lehmberg had lost public confidence after her DWI arrest — a crime for which she quickly pleaded guilty and was sentenced to 45 days in jail. Had she resigned, Perry would have appointed a replacement to fill the remainder of her term.

Lehmberg has declined to comment on Perry's actions and the investigation in recent weeks. But in June, after addressing county commissioners about funding for the Public Integrity Unit, Lehmberg said Perry's action "feels partisan, and it's misguided, as far as I'm concerned."

Lehmberg's refusal

In interviews with the American-Statesman, Daugherty and other sources described the discussions about Lehmberg and the unit's funding as tense and fraught with political land mines amid outraged calls for Lehmberg's ouster and worry that county taxpayers would be on the hook for the unit's funding.

The discussions involved

WHY IT MATTERS

An indictment could affect Gov. Rick Perry's political future. Although he is retiring in January, he hasn't ruled out another presidential campaign. His veto cost the Public Integrity Unit \$7.5 million over two years. Travis County taxpayers are paying \$1.7 million to keep the office running for a year with one-third the number of employees. Two people were laid off, and others retired or found other work.

not in online article?

berg's term.

Watson contacted a Lehmberg lawyer and eventually talked directly to Lehmberg about the governor's plans. About the same time, the American-Statesman broke the news of the governor's veto threat.

Throughout the drunk-driving arrest controversy, Lehmberg's associates have said the veto threat — and Perry making good on that prom-

funding to the unit unless Lehmberg resigned. Yet with time running out in the session, that effort never gained traction.

Then on July 8, as county officials were discussing their upcoming budget and feeling pressure to keep the unit running, a meeting of county and state officials and their staffs took place. The gathering didn't involve Watson, but other participants included Daugherty; Armbrister; John Hille, a lawyer employed by Travis County who represents county commissioners; Mike Morrissey, a senior adviser to Perry; and Deece Eckstein, the intergovernmental relations coordinator for Travis County.

Daugherty said he asked Eckstein to set up the meeting with Morrissey and Armbrister to see if they would be willing to approach Perry with an idea about how to restore the unit's funding. He said Perry's representatives felt that if they had an offer "in hand" they could approach the governor.

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