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Commissioner's land purchase is questioned

By ED TIMMS and KEVIN KRAUSE, Staff Writers

Dallas County Commissioner John Wiley Price, while serving on a board that oversees the county's bail bond industry, obtained two vacant lots valued at more than \$50,000 from an attorney who has written millions in bail bonds.

The two lots on North Marsalis Avenue, not far from Price's north Oak Cliff home, were previously owned by Dallas lawyer William T. 'Bill' Knox.

Records obtained by *The Dallas Morning News* earlier this year showed that Knox had written more than \$5.8 million in bail bonds at that time — more than any other lawyer in Dallas County.

Price is the subject of an investigation by the FBI and Internal Revenue Service. Federal agents, armed with search warrants, on Monday raided his home and office and those of two close associates, carting away boxes of documents and materials.

As is custom, the FBI refused to disclose the nature of its investigation or whether Price and his associates face criminal charges. But Price financial records were among the documents sought by the agents.

It's unclear what, if any, role Price's real estate transactions might play in the investigation, but one authority on local government questioned the appropriateness of his dealings with Knox.

"It certainly doesn't appear to pass the smell test," said urban affairs expert Terrell Blodgett. "And I would think that any county commissioner — or any public official — would be smarter when dealing with something like that."

Blodgett, a professor at the LBJ School of Public Affairs at the University of Texas at Austin and a former city manager, said a public official should know that such a transaction "may come to light — and if it does, there's no way he could look like it's on the up-and-up."

Price, a longtime member of the bail bond board, could not be reached for comment.

The bail bond board is responsible for supervising and regulating "each phase of the bonding business in the county," according to its rules and procedures.

In practice, the board exercises limited regulatory authority over the county's sprawling bail bond industry, particularly over attorneys who write bail bonds.

Knox said Tuesday that he had "absolutely no idea" that Price was on the bail bond board when the property was purchased last year. In addition to his law practice, Knox also has been active in real estate over the years.

"I've never so much as even had lunch with John Wiley Price," he said. "We've never had a discussion about the bail bond board or anything on the agenda."

Knox said he was contacted by Price after the commissioner saw for-sale signs on the property. Knox said the sale was an arms-length transaction through a title company, and he did not know anything about how Price financed the purchase.

Deeds for the two properties show they were transferred to Price on Aug. 12, 2010.

Dallas Central Appraisal District records list the value of the property at 621 N. Marsalis Ave. at \$22,500, and the 715 N. Marsalis Ave. property at \$29,700.

Knox said he purchased the two properties for about \$45,000 and had listed them for almost two years with "almost no interest" from potential buyers.

He provided documents showing that Price paid \$40,000 for each lot. "So I almost doubled my money," Knox said.

There is no record of a lien involving Price and the two lots, indicating that he may not have taken out a loan to pay for them.

The News requested all of Price's personal finance statements, a form that elected county officials are supposed to submit annually, from Dallas County Clerk John Warren earlier this year.

Warren's office provided reports from 2000 through 2008.

Price filed his 2010 personal financial statement on May 2.

That statement listed the two properties he purchased from Knox.

Those statements indicated Price increased his land holdings during that period from three parcels in the 2009 report to seven in the 2010 document. Those seven parcels, which include his home and the two Knox properties, are appraised by DCAD at \$748,530.

The records don't indicate how Price financed the purchases. His county salary as a commissioner is \$130,000 a year.

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