

NW Indiana Fire Dept. Equipment Sold by Ex-Chief — Where's The Cash?

May 18, 2011



THURSDAY, JAN. 12, 2012

FOLLOW-UP: State audit cites Hobart for sale of fire truck, exercise equipment

In 2002, the Hobart Fire Department secured an \$89,000 federal grant to pay for,

among other things, pricey new exercise equipment so firefighters could stay fit.

Now, nearly a decade later, the Hobart Police Department is trying to determine whether taxpayers got burned when a high-ranking fire official subsequently sold some of the workout machines—and a city-owned snowmobile—for cash to his underlings.

The official—Capt. Bill McCorkle, who was Hobart’s fire chief for about five years—acknowledged this week to the Better Government Association that he off-loaded the equipment at bargain-basement prices, saying he did so because it either wasn’t working or wasn’t being used.

McCorkle insisted that he funneled the cash back into the fire department.

“I wanted to clear it out,” McCorkle said of the gear. “I didn’t think nothing of it.”

But prompted in part by questions raised by the [Post-Tribune](#) and the BGA, a non-profit civic watchdog, Hobart detectives are trying to figure out whether any laws or rules were violated, and exactly where the money and equipment ended up.

The detectives are reviewing documents and interviewing firefighters, including McCorkle, who has been on the force for 25 years.

“Right now [we’re] just trying to determine whether it was poor management practices, or if it was criminal, if anybody pocketed any money,” said Hobart Deputy Police Chief Jeff White.

“Hopefully within the next two weeks we should have some sort of answers,” White added.

This is what the *Post-Tribune* and the BGA pieced together so far through interviews and documents:

In 2002, before McCorkle became chief, Hobart secured an \$89,000 grant from the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), according to records obtained from the City of Hobart under Indiana’s open records law.

The money was to cover an aggressive “wellness” program so firefighters in town could get in better shape and avoid illness and injury, the documents show. McCorkle was chosen to oversee the program.

A sizable chunk of the grant—which included roughly \$80,000 from FEMA, and a matching portion of about \$10,000 from the city—went for exercise equipment for the four local firehouses.

“After a review, we determined that a multi-purpose machine, treadmill and recumbent bike would provide the ideal workout needs of our firefighters,” the grant application stated in part.

“Awarding this grant...will provide for an effective and efficient fire response for years to come.”

In reality, some of the equipment got little use, McCorkle said.

So starting in or around 2007 when he was chief, McCorkle said, he sold off a Bowflex machine and a VersaClimber to firefighters for cash, McCorkle said.



Firefighters (l to r) John Boyle, Joe Lavendusky and chief William McCorkle workout at Hobart Fire Station No. 1 in Hobart Aug. 1, 2005. | Archive~Sun-Times Media

His recollection is one went for \$100, the other for \$750, he said. (The Bowflex appears to have originally cost the fire department about \$2,500, while the VersaClimber cost more than \$3,000, according to records from Hobart.)

McCorkle also acknowledged selling off the department’s old snowmobile for \$100 to a Hobart firefighter. It’s unclear how much that originally was purchased for.

McCorkle said he can’t recall exactly where the money ended up, but believes he deposited it in one of the fire department funds, or used it to buy more

equipment, including a Smith Machine, which is used in weight training.

In a letter to the BGA, city attorney Anthony DeBonis, Jr., indicated that, so far, no city records were found to confirm that the money made its way back into municipal or fire department coffers.

In any event, McCorkle said he didn't keep the money.

"As far as someone accusing me of pocketing something, that's totally false," he said, adding that if he did anything wrong, it wasn't out of malice. "I'm sorry, I'm stupid I guess."

City officials said there are rules governing the sale of not only municipal equipment but also material obtained with federal money, but they're still sorting them out.

Also being explored is whether the fire department is missing other supplies or gear - including at least one computer, city officials said.

FEMA officials had no immediate comment when reached by the BGA this week. But, according to one document obtained from Hobart, FEMA was assured in 2007 by the fire department that the exercise "equipment is still being utilized" and this "is a long term investment and we anticipate continued success through this program."

Hobart officials recently reached out to FEMA to alert the agency to the problems, a city official said.

Brian Taylor, who succeeded McCorkle last year as chief in the northwest Indiana community of about 26,000 residents, said his people are cooperating with police.

"We actually received a memo from the city attorney, this matter is under internal investigation by the Hobart Police Department," Taylor said, adding that, as a result, he's limited by what he can discuss.

But, he said, "I've known Bill a long time, Bill's a great guy...whatever he's done has been for the best of the department."

This story was written and reported by Robert Herguth, BGA Editor of Investigations, and Karen Caffarini of the Post-Tribune.