

## Is Information about the USM Plane Being Covered Up?

HATTIESBURG – This week at USM couldn't have gone any worse had USM president Martha Saunders prepared the Golden Eagles football team for its game against South Carolina and USM head football coach Larry Fedora dealt with the \$15 million FY2012 budget cut. Regular followers of USMNEWS.net are aware that much of bad press surrounding the Hattiesburg-based campus these days involves reaction to Saunders' decision to terminate 29 tenured and tenure-track faculty, a figure that raised the number of terminal contracts that Saunders has issued to similarly situated faculty to more than 40 since 2009. As expected, much of the controversy surrounding the faculty cuts has centered on Saunders' decision to spend \$2 million leasing a private plane from the USM Foundation.

As announced just days ago, USMNEWS.net has obtained a stack of documents from USM that relate to use of the airplane and the expenses associated with that use. These documents were obtained via a Mississippi Open Records request. Now, having had time to compare the discovery with information about the plane's whereabouts in the early days of the lease, it appears that USM may be engaging in a cover-up vis-à-vis the Beechcraft King Air. For example, FlightAware records indicate that the USM airplane made at least one trip to south Louisiana shortly after the lease went into effect. However, the package of documents obtained by USMNEWS.net does not show this trip among the dozens of trips that were revealed by the institution.

Another curious aspect of the documents turned over by USM concerns the invoice dates and the timing of the respective air travel. For example, consider the invoice below, which details a trip to Macon, Georgia, in the Beechcraft King Air that was made by several USM officials on 7-May-09. The date of the invoice is 16-April-09, or three weeks before the journey was made. Though one might conclude that it is not unusual to expense a planned trip three weeks before it occurs, in this case, however, the trip made by USM's Joe Paul, Cecil Burge, Stan Hauer, Frances Karnes, and Brooks Moore was to attend the funeral of former USM president Horace Fleming. Fleming died on 1-May-09, 15 days *after* the invoice date.

Of course, any attempt by USM to produce, *ex post*, documents simply to (*partially*) comply with a Mississippi statute would be ill-advised. However, given the possibility, investigation by USMNEWS.net into these matters is ongoing and will continue. Readers will not only want to stay abreast of this developing story, any useful information that can be provided to USMNEWS.net would be welcomed.

