

MGCCC Prez Publicly Scolds USM's Saunders

Lott Accuses USM Prez of Propagandizing

The rift between USM and Mississippi Gulf Coast Community College over MGCCC's decision to provide a special offer on its Gautier facility to the University of South Alabama took a turn for the surreal. Melissa Scallan's [22-March-10 report](#) for the *Sun Herald* entitled "Signals Crossed" provides the details of the latest spat between the two college executives. MGCCC president Willis Lott told Scallan that USM president Martha Saunders' public criticism of MGCCC's decision to offer USA the special rent deal was a case of propagandizing. According to Lott, "[w]e feel like [Saunders] did not give all the facts" with regard to her characterization of the agreement between the MS-based community college and the AL-based research university.

This latest turn in the story also has Saunders stating that she found out about the rental agreement only after news of it appeared in the print media. Lott countered by telling Scallan that he sent Saunders an e-mail back in Oct-09 to inform her that MGCCC was in discussions with USA about use of the facility. Saunders admitted to Scallan that she received Lott's e-mail, but still didn't learn of the finalization of the deal until news of it appeared in the papers. In hammering home this notion, Saunders told Scallan "[t]here's a far cry between meeting with people and finalizing a deal." Lott retorted that he has been calling Saunders' office, but has been unable to reach her. He also stated that she has not returned his calls. Saunders explained that she has been out of town for a week and has not received his calls.¹

Sources tell USMNEWS.net that Saunders' upset over the whole episode possibly stems from the perception that Lott and the USA president are much more financially savvy executives than she is. Reports indicate that USM pulled out of its lease with MGCC due to the current fiscal crisis. In doing so, USM would save \$200,000 per year in rent. Mississippi IHL president Hank Bounds then admitted to Scallan that USM had also spent \$700,000 improving MGCCC's Jackson County facility over the last four years, including \$272,000 in 2009. Now, MGCCC and USA have entered into a 3-year agreement on the Gautier facility, wherein USA will occupy the facility in the first year on a rent-free basis. Additionally, USA is committed to spending \$100,000 at the outset to furnish part of the facility.

Judging by the comments left by readers, some see this situation as described above. One reader referred to Saunders as "a toddler having a temper tantrum because she didn't get her way." Another reader who holds degrees from both USM and USA informed the others that USA was as good or better than USM, while others pointed out that MS residents would pay in-state tuition levels to attend USA. According to sources, none of this information is good for USM. Neither are Saunders' comments.

¹ Saunders own blog (at usm.edu) indicates that she recently spent 3 days in Washington, D.C., not a week. Saunders' whereabouts, assuming they were not Hattiesburg, for the other 2-4 days around this trip are unknown at this time.