



E-mails show turmoil at local police

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Mark Emann planned to take a week off in October from his duties as Princeton Township police chief for a “carefree” trip to Florida. With some of his closest friends, he planned to stay at a beach house in Daytona Beach and attend “Biketoberfest,” a mecca for motorcycle enthusiasts.

“The house is right on the beach, so plan on swimming,” Emann wrote in one e-mail to his friends. “Be advised, I’m taking a boogie board along also.”

But days before he was set to hit the ocean, check out custom bikes and attend concerts, Emann canceled. Instead, he spent that week — and the next two months — under criminal investigation.

The Mercer County Prosecutor’s Office believes Emann, Lt. Michael Henderson and Cpl. Arthur Villaruz illegally sold Township property, though it is unclear what exactly the county believes the officers sold. All three were removed from their positions on Oct. 1, and police operations have been overseen by the prosecutor’s office.

The highest-ranking officer remaining at the department is Capt. Robert Buchanan, who was planning to join Emann on the Biketoberfest trip. He canceled as well.

To better understand what happened within the department in the days leading up to the removal of the officers, The Daily Princetonian reviewed roughly 6,000 pages of correspondence obtained under the

Open Public Records Act. The review consisted of all e-mails transmitted between July 1 and Oct. 27 to or from the officers under investigation.

To obtain the e-mails, the 'Prince' spent the past month negotiating access to the records with the Township clerk's and attorney's offices. The 'Prince' was allowed to inspect and photograph the e-mails, which filled three bankers' boxes.

The e-mails make clear that Emann knew he was in trouble at least one week before his removal. He abruptly canceled the Daytona Beach trip days before departure and sent an e-mail to the Rev. Matthew Ristuccia '75, the senior pastor at the Westerly Road Church in Princeton, saying, "It's a bit of a mess. I may call you within a few days once I sort a few things out personally."

The review also shows that there was almost no e-mail correspondence exclusively between the three officers in the lead-up to their removal. One e-mail, sent from Buchanan to Henderson on the day of the county takeover, was redacted by the Township because it referenced an ongoing investigation and confidential personnel records, according to the Township attorney's office.

In all, 84 full e-mails were redacted because they referenced topics exempted from public disclosure, such as medical and retirement issues and ongoing investigations.

The prosecutor's office believes the officers sold "moveable property," referring to Township items that are not land. Several of the e-mails referenced items that could be considered "moveable property."

For example, Henderson wrote on Sept. 12 to other officers that a

“clothing order” arrived in early September, though other items such as flashlights, boots, wool socks, fleece liners and reflective jacket flaps were backordered.

Three days later, Henderson wrote to officers that “we are rapidly approaching the end of the Township’s budget year” and asked whether anyone needed firearms accessories.

Another e-mail indicated that the Township participated in a Drug Enforcement Administration program aimed at anonymously collecting unused, unwanted and expired medicines. Emann authorized the police to set up a collection site on Sept. 24 and 25, where drugs were accepted for disposal.

The officers’ inboxes also chronicled day-to-day operations of a small-town police department — parking complaints, FBI intelligence reports and reports of damage to police cruisers — and personal messages with friends and family.

Nine days before he was removed, Emann e-mailed Ristuccia, who had earlier inquired if Emann wanted to talk.

“I’ll be OK for now, as Bobby and I are still good,” Emann wrote. In previous e-mails, Emann had referred to Buchanan as “Bobby.” Emann signed the e-mail the way he often did, with just his initials, MVE. Ristuccia did not write back.

Then, on Oct. 1, John Beeson, the pastor of ministry development at the Westerly Road Church, e-mailed Emann: “Swung by today to ... see how you’re doing. Control told me you were out and Bobby and Mike were in meetings.” Oct. 1 was the day the three officers were removed.

“Hope you’re well. Let me know if I can do anything, okay?” Beeson concluded. Emann did not respond from his Township e-mail address.

The e-mails also indicate that there was other turmoil at the department in September. On Sept. 15, Emann wrote to Gary De Blasio, the executive director of the Corner House Counseling Center in Princeton. The center helps people with substance abuse and other issues, according to its website.

In an e-mail titled “Confidential: I Need Advice,” Emann wrote, “I need your advice and perhaps guidance on an issue over here. I have a Lieutenant and Sergeant at odds with each other,” he said. Henderson was the only lieutenant at the department, but it is unclear who the sergeant was.

“It may become a hostile work environment issue (if it isn’t already),” Emann wrote, adding that he wanted to speak with De Blasio that day or the next. De Blasio wrote back two minutes later that he was available that afternoon. There was no further e-mail correspondence about the situation.

Also in September, Emann’s friends expressed worry after he backed out from Biketoberfest.

One of Emann’s friends wrote to Emann and Buchanan on Sept. 29, saying, “Although the trip would not be the same without you two I am most concerned for you on a personal level ... If you don’t mind I would like to hear from one of you as I am concerned. You guys were like my brothers for 20 years.”

Four of Emann’s friends ultimately attended Biketoberfest, and one of

them said in an interview Sunday night that he is still searching for answers about Emann's removal.

"We're all wondering what the hell is going on," said Anthony Recine, a retired detective sergeant at the Hamilton Township Police Department and a friend of Emann for 30 years.

"I'm concerned; everybody else is concerned," Recine said, adding that he did not know why Emann was removed. "I'm not privy to that at all. [The prosecutor's office has] locked down pretty tight."

"Because of the investigation, I can't elaborate as to specifically what type of property it was," said Casey DeBlasio, a spokeswoman for the prosecutor's office, last month. She did not respond to a request for further comment last week.

A member of the prosecutor's office, William Straniero, is currently supervising the police department.

Emann, the two pastors and several of Emann's Biketoberfest friends did not respond to requests for comment last week.

The last e-mail Emann received, on Oct. 2, was from a resident. The man wrote, "I have read the story [of the scandal] with disbelief ... Our thoughts are focused on you and your family. Hang tough!"

The resident received simply an automatic response: "Account Inactive," with instructions to contact Buchanan.