Convention center firing sends signal

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Just a few weeks after Joseph Mccorvey said the startling parts out loud, he was fired as the head of the Pine Bluff Convention Center. The reason: the Convention Center needs to head in a "different direction," said Lisa Kosmitis, head of the Civic Auditorium Complex Commission. Such a wonderfully vague euphemism for getting the ax, don't you think? You're here, and we want to be there. Bye.

As for something more concrete for why he was terminated after serving since 2018, there was apparently nothing in his personnel file. That's convenient if, say, a nosy someone, like a newspaper reporter, wants to request his personnel file under the Freedom of Information Act but rather inconvenient for the commission when and if Mccorvey decides to fight his termination. The point being, it can be a bad look for the commission if its top employee was given no reason for being tossed out the door.

One rather obvious possibility for his sudden departure is that he dared open his mouth and complain about Go Forward Pine Bluff. (Insert gasp here.) And on top of that, he pointed out that the plan for a Marriott Hotel — also a Go Forward-supported effort — to be built next to the convention center was short $1.4 million.

Mccorvey's controller, Barbara Davis, said at the May commission meeting that the convention center has on numerous occasions picked up the tab for Go Forward events because Go Forward didn't have the money.

"We had to cover the cost with our money," she said.

And, according to Davis, because the convention center is still owed $20,000 by Go Forward for the King Cotton tournament, the convention center wants that money up front out of a $50,000 contribution from the city for King Cotton. And that apparently ran counter to what Go Forward wanted.

"Ryan is not wanting us to get the money back," she said, referring to Go Forward CEO Ryan Watley. "He wants to get the full $50,000, and we later get our money back. The $20,000 is King Cotton's expense. We need to be paid."

That is a rather embarrassing revelation and one that must have stung Go Forward.

Then there is the hotel flap. The deal was supposed to have closed at the end of March, but then Mccorvey revealed at that same May meeting that considerable funding is still needed before the deal can go through. The city has already coughed up $2.9 million for the project after promising

not to dip into tax dollars to make the hotel happen. So where will the additional $1.4 million come from? That's unclear.

We noticed that no one has pointed a finger at the Public Facilities Board. The board president, Letrece Harris, held a bit of a pep rally recently, saying the hotel project was still on go, despite the money problems.

"We're at a point where the cost of construction between the time when we actually financed the USDA (loan) through Farmers (and) the cost of construction went up," Harris said. "Yes, you probably could say that was something that we should have kept up with."

Well, yes, you could say that or perhaps could have hollered it from the rooftops. Mccorvey has a day job of running a convention center, but the only job the facilities board has is watching over this hotel idea to make sure it happens. If the board didn't notice the project was short $1.4 million, we wonder if they are up to the challenge.

In short, Mccorvey and Davis spoke candidly about two important issues – what is going on with its financial interaction with Go Forward and what is going on with the hotel project. And it would appear that for his candor, he has been fired. It's the kind of thing that can happen when one goes up against powerful people who don't like to be questioned or embarrassed.

Click here to listen to a recording of the May meeting of the Civic Auditorium Complex Commission.