https://www.tcpalm.com/story/opinion/columnists/blake-fontenay/2024/06/05/pearson-was-vetted-by-fdle-days-before-surprise-pick-as-slc-sheriff/73926603007/

No shocker: Records show DeSantis' staff planned Keith Pearson's appointment well in advance

Blake Fontenay

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I wish I could say I'm surprised, but I'm not.

Records released by Gov. Ron DeSantis' office this week to TCPalm confirm what I and others have long suspected about Keith Pearson's appointment as St. Lucie County sheriff.

This was no spur-of-the-moment decision, made in haste following Ken Mascara's (seemingly) abrupt announcement on Dec. 1 that he would be retiring at the end of the same day.

Instead, the governor's records clearly show Pearson's appointment was carefully planned days, if not weeks, before the official announcement was made. And the paper trail, public records provided by the governor's office about six months after TCPalm requested them, seems to have begun right after a family politically connected to Pearson made generous donations to DeSantis' then-active presidential campaign.

Timing doesn't appear to be coincidental

Neither the governor's staff nor Pearson responded to requests for comment, but the documents tell a pretty interesting story.

Among more than 7,000 pages the governor's office supplied to TCPalm is a Nov. 21 email from what appears to be the personal email account of Alex Kelly, then DeSantis' acting chief of staff, to his government email account. The file Kelly was transferring was titled "Keith Pearson awards and recognition.PDF"

That was the day after several members of the DiFrancesco family made generous contributions to the DeSantis campaign and two political action committees supporting the campaign.

According to Federal Election Commission records, Anthony, Carol, Michael, Patrick and Steven DiFrancesco each contributed $6,600 — the maximum allowed — to the DeSantis

campaign Nov. 20. Each of the five, who are listed as Florida residents, also donated $5,000 to Great American Comeback and $11,600 to Team DeSantis, the two PACs.

The only exception was Steven DiFrancesco, who was listed as having made a $12,600 contribution to Team DeSantis, rather than the $11,600 given by the other four.

Anthony "Tony" DiFrancesco is a Fort Pierce businessman, convicted felon whom DeSantis pardoned earlier that year and a political ally of Pearson's.

On Nov. 15, less than a week before the DiFrancesco donations to DeSantis and the PACs, Anthony DiFrancesco hosted a fundraiser for DeSantis' presidential campaign at the headquarters of Missionary Flights International, located at Treasure Coast International Airport in Fort Pierce.

The DiFrancescos and companies with family members listed as officers or registered agents have also made generous contributions to Pearson's campaign for sheriff, according to St. Lucie County Supervisor of Elections Office records.

Governor gets contributions, then Pearson gets vetted

Pearson attended the Nov. 15 fundraiser and had his photo taken with the governor and Jarret Romanello, executive director of the St. Lucie Sheriff's Police Athletic League.

Within a few days after the fundraiser and the DiFrancesco campaign donations, DeSantis' staff began preparing for Pearson's appointment.

A Nov. 27 email from the governor's appointments office asked the Florida Department of Law Enforcement if a background check on Pearson could be completed "by the end of the day tomorrow, Tuesday, November 28."

Later on Nov. 27, an email from Sheri Taylor, a senior crime intelligence analyst supervisor for FDLE, confirmed the background check had been completed.

On Nov. 29, Chelsea Aaron, the governor's director of appointments, sent an email to Carter Hull, the deputy director of appointments, with a question regarding some of the wording in Pearson's bio.

Also on Nov. 29, the governor's communications team had a draft news release ready, announcing Pearson as the new sheriff of St. Lucie County. That draft release included the same language for Pearson's bio that was part of the official news release distributed to the media on Dec. 1.

In his resignation letter to the governor dated Dec. 1, Mascara made no mention of any previous conversations the two men had about the transition. The way the letter was worded, it did not appear Mascara knew who his successor would be.

"Whoever you appoint as St. Lucie County's next sheriff, you have my commitment for a smooth transition so the next sheriff continues to successfully serve our citizens," Mascara wrote.

A surprise pick? Let's get real

Nor did the news release DeSantis sent out on Dec. 1 acknowledge there had been any planning for the transition.

"Today, Gov. Ron DeSantis was notified of Sheriff Ken Mascara's retirement effective close of business on December 1, 2023," the release stated. "To ensure law enforcement operations continue without delay, the governor announced the appointment of Keith Pearson as sheriff of St. Lucie County."

That narrative was followed by a brief bio on Pearson.

In an interview the day after his appointment was announced, Pearson told TCPalm reporter Melissa Holsman he got little advance notice the governor was planning to pick him.

“I got a phone call about 30 minutes before the press release came out that the governor put his confidence in me to lead St. Lucie County,” Pearson said the next day. “And it's just been very, very humbling and exciting since then.”

It's ridiculous to suggest the governor's staffers were looking at Pearson's credentials and requesting a background check without bothering to ask him if he would be interested in taking the job.

But, based on some of the emails DeSantis received following the appointment, he didn't vet Pearson closely enough.

Among the documents we obtained were emails from numerous people who wrote to DeSantis to suggest he had made a bad decision, questioning Pearson's integrity and fitness to lead the department. More than one alleged Pearson had to be removed from a post he previously held with the sheriff's narcotics unit because there were questions about his credibility when bringing cases to court.

There were other allegations in the protest emails and letters, including that Pearson filed a lawsuit against a painting company on false grounds and also that he removed a dirt bike

from the sheriff's evidence room for his son's use, then later sold the bike to a man in Miami.

There's no evidence in the correspondence records that any of those allegations made against Pearson were investigated by the governor's staff.

Does DeSantis care if any Pearson allegations are true?

All in all, just a cursory review of the records suggests both DeSantis and Pearson have some explaining to do.

The narrative that Pearson's appointment was a surprise reaction to Mascara's departure doesn't pass the smell test. In truth, it never did. Nor does the notion Pearson's elevation from a middle management job in the sheriff's office to the top position didn't have anything to do with the political contributions the governor received.

This looks like a clear-cut case of "pay to play." Only it's all of St. Lucie County's residents, not just the DiFrancescos, who are doing the paying.

This column reflects the opinion of Blake Fontenay. Contact him via email at bfontenay@gannett.com or at 772-232-5424.

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https://www.tcpalm.com/story/opinion/columnists/blake-fontenay/2024/07/11/sheriff-pearson-its-not-a-conspiracy-if-people-are-telling-the-truth/74340605007/

'Swamp' fever: Sheriff Pearson's letter to St. Lucie residents suggests he's cracking

Blake Fontenay

Treasure Coast Newspapers

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It may be time for someone to do a wellness check on St. Lucie County Sheriff Keith Pearson.

That was my reaction after reading a six-page manifesto that was mailed to some St. Lucie County residents with the sheriff's signature a few days ago. The letter was marked as paid for by Pearson's campaign, and its talking points are consistent with a Facebook video Pearson recently posted.

While Pearson may have thought he was making a strong and coherent argument for why voters should select him in the Aug. 20 Republican primary, the letter sends the opposite message.

He comes across as paranoid and delusional, unwilling to acknowledge the criticisms leveled against him over the past several months are justified and the direct result of actions he has taken.

Rather than own up to his shortcomings, Pearson presents himself as being attacked by some vast conspiracy (where have we heard that language before?) that's determined to keep his awesomeness from shining through at any cost.

Swamp fever may be taking hold, all right

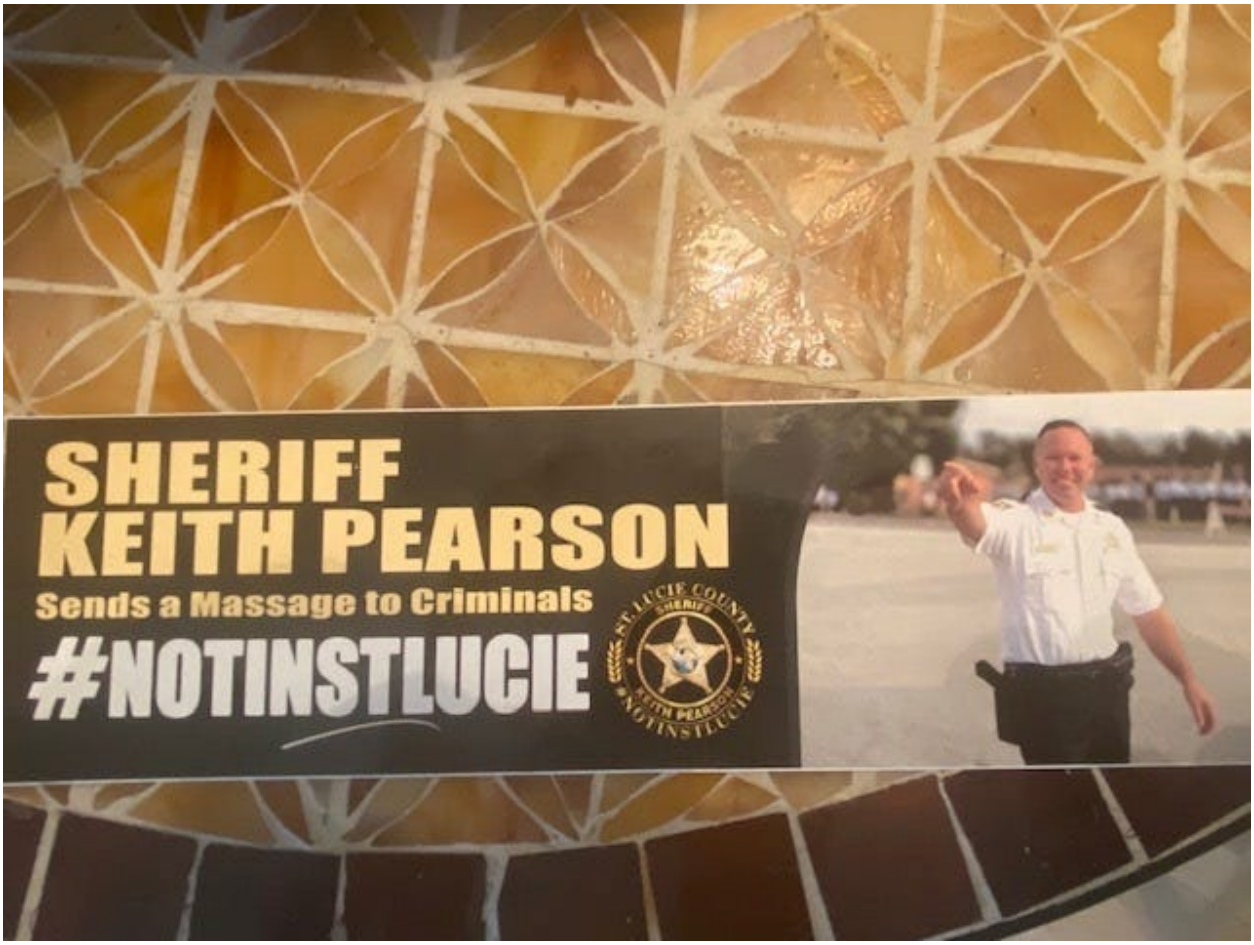
Of course, he's given a name to this sinister group of evildoers: The "St. Lucie Swamp." In his letter, Pearson claims to be under attack from "a host of monsters," including "fake Republicans" who have allied with a "liberal Fake Newspaper" (the capitalization is his) to stop "the first conservative sheriff St. Lucie County has had in decades."

The letter also takes aim at U.S. Attorney Markenzy Lapointe (whose first name he misspells), a "Joe Biden appointee," and State Attorney Tom Bakkedahl, a "career bureaucrat" and a "fake, soft on crime, Republican."

In addition to his creative uses of capitalization and punctuation, some passages in the letter are underlined or highlighted for emphasis.

(As a side note, proofreading seems to be a recurring problem with his campaign. Some of his public campaign signs misspell the word "governor" and a limited run of Pearson bumper stickers made the unfortunate promise to send criminals a "massage.")

Massaging his message





The overall tone is like that movie scene where the Wizard of Oz bellows "pay no attention to the man behind the curtain" after being unmasked as a fraud by Dorothy's dog, Toto.

"Everything these swamp monsters and fake Republicans are doing are lies," Pearson wrote. "They are literally making things up and they have their fake news media lap dogs go along."

'Care' about criminals? Who does that?

What lies has anyone told about him? That part he doesn't say.

And speaking as only one media "lap dog," I had only met Richard Del Toro, considered Pearson's main primary opponent, once for about 30 seconds before the recommendation interview TCPalm's Editorial Board held for the sheriff's candidates Tuesday evening.

It should be noted that, despite all the bravado Pearson suggests he's shown in facing the so-called "swamp monsters," he skipped that interview rather than take the opportunity to confront the "fake Liberal Newspaper" and his opponents to set his record straight. (He also didn't respond to multiple emailed requests for comment about the letter, but that's nothing unusual.)

According to Pearson, Lapointe is soft on crime and supportive of the "Black Lives Matter ideology." Why? Because, as TCPalm reported, Lapointe criticized Pearson for publishing unauthorized videos of arrested suspects on social media, including one which, in the prosecutor's words, "comes across as if the sheriff is posing with an antelope that he just shot on a safari."

"He asked me to care about the criminals we arrest," Pearson wrote in his letter. No, we wouldn't want to treat people as innocent until proven guilty. No sir. Not in St. Lucie County.

I wonder how Pearson would feel if the Florida Department of Law Enforcement were investigating one of his family members and decided to post an arrest photo as a hunting trophy.

For that matter, given Gov. Ron DeSantis recently confirmed Pearson is again under investigation by the FDLE, Pearson himself could end up starring in a different role on social media if other law enforcement officers didn't show the type of restraint he lacks.

About that 'governor's choice' stuff ...

Speaking of DeSantis, Pearson refers to himself a couple of times in the letter as the governor's choice for the position. DeSantis did name him as an interim appointee last December following the abrupt resignation of former Sheriff Ken Mascara, but the governor hasn't announced any endorsements in the upcoming election.

In his letter, Pearson somehow failed to mention DeSantis picked him days after Anthony "Tony" DiFrancesco, one of the sheriff's political allies, hosted a fundraiser for the governor's then-active presidential campaign, then DiFrancesco and other family members donated more than $100,000 to DeSantis and supportive political action committees.

Records provided by the governor's office show DeSantis' staff began vetting Pearson as a potential interim appointee for the sheriff's job almost immediately after the campaign contributions were made.

I guess when you're only writing six pages, some pertinent facts must be edited out.

Pearson's letter also admonished Bakkedahl to "stay in his lane." That's no doubt a reference to the guest column Bakkedahl published in our newspaper, in which the longtime Republican prosecutor criticized Pearson for running his office "like a frat house replete with gang signs, shameless self-promotion and the constant search for clickbait."

Bakkedahl rightly concluded Pearson's actions could undermine public confidence in law enforcement.

However, one of the most damaging distortions in Pearson's letter, in my view, is his claim the so-called "swamp monsters" have been discrediting the work of other law enforcement officers because of the criticism he's receiving.

Look inward for the source of your pain, sheriff

That's absolutely untrue. This isn't about the brave men and women who are in the streets every day and night, keeping the community safe. It's about Pearson, and the way he's single-handedly trying to undermine the excellent work they do.

Pearson's own deputies must understand this distinction, since the employee union that represents them endorsed Del Toro.

In reality, if people value the role law enforcement plays in a democratic society, it's their duty to hold accountable individuals, like Pearson, who abuse that public trust.

Pearson's letter also takes the "swamp monsters" to task because they ask "ridiculous questions about my past and bring up things that have long been investigated and dismissed."

It's hard to know what he means there. That could be a reference to the FDLE investigation that implicated Mascara and Pearson as having orchestrated a "ghost candidate" campaign to unseat one of Mascara's rivals in 2020.

No criminal charges were filed as a result of that investigation, but Mascara still faces possible sanctions by the Florida Commission on Ethics for his role in that 2020 campaign.

It could also be a reference to a 2016 traffic stop of a suspected drug dealer. That case was complicated by questions about the credibility of testimony provided by Pearson and one of the other officers on the scene.

Pearson's letter also urged people to cancel their subscriptions to the newspaper and "start getting your news directly from the source." Relying solely on government controlled news sources sounds like a headfirst leap into totalitarianism to me.

In all seriousness, the letter seems like the words of a man who's under a tremendous amount of strain. That's unfortunate, but he brought this upon himself by accepting the sheriff's appointment and then trying to parley it into a full-time elected position based on some well-documented backroom political dealing.

Pearson is trying to blame everyone else around him for wounds that are almost entirely self-inflicted. My six-word rebuttal to his six-page letter?

It's not us, Keith. It's you.

This column reflects the opinion of Blake Fontenay. Contact him via email at bfontenay@gannett.com or at 772-232-5424.

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https://www.tcpalm.com/story/opinion/columnists/blake-fontenay/2024/08/21/sheriff-keith-pearsons-unconventional-campaign-fizzled-from-the-start/74885188007/

St. Lucie Sheriff Keith Pearson tried to fool voters from the very start. They noticed.

Blake Fontenay

Treasure Coast Newspapers

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From Day 1, Keith Pearson's tenure as St. Lucie County sheriff started with a bit of stagecraft that fell a little flat.

At his initial news conference last December, he told reporters his appointment to the post by Gov. Ron DeSantis caught him by surprise. Pearson said he didn't know he was going to be replacing Ken Mascara until a few minutes before DeSantis publicly announced his pick.

That seemed like a dubious assertion at the time. And records provided months later by DeSantis' office show the governor's staff began vetting Pearson for the job several days before Mascara's supposedly surprise resignation.

That vetting appears to have begun the day after several members of the DiFrancesco family made generous contributions to DeSantis' then-active presidential campaign and two political action committees supporting the campaign. Anthony DiFrancesco, a Fort Pierce businessman, is a close political ally of Pearson's.

For Pearson, his attempts at image building never really got better, culminating in his decisive loss to acting Port St. Lucie Police Chief Richard Del Toro in the Republican primary for sheriff Tuesday.

Although he tried to convince everyone he was thrust into the limelight by DeSantis' decision, Pearson's actions suggested he wanted to be sheriff very badly.

Unfortunately for him, he made several decisions over the last eight-plus months that undermined his ability to win the public support he needed to win an election.

Pearson went into campaign mode from the start

At that initial news conference, he announced he had filed paperwork that day to run for a full four-year term, which he claimed he had never considered before he got the call from DeSantis.

Since his name had already replaced his predecessor's on signs inside and outside the sheriff's headquarters, that professed reluctance about entering the political arena rang a little hollow.

Pearson quickly pivoted into full-on campaigning mode, making sure his name appeared on everything from electronic traffic sign boards to broadcast public safety announcements.

From the start, it was difficult to separate Pearson's official duties as sheriff from his campaigning, because every public move he made seemed geared toward helping him win the election.

At his first news conference, Pearson vowed transparency would be his top priority. That turned out not to be true, either. Almost from the very start, journalists and the public found it difficult to get information from his office, including documents that were clearly public records.

Rather than relying on traditional media coverage, Pearson seemed content to get his message out through TikTok and Facebook posts. These posts, some of which featured arrested suspects in degrading positions, struck some in the community as unprofessional and even juvenile.

They drew criticism from others in the law enforcement community, including State Attorney Tom Bakkedahl, U.S. Attorney Markenzy Lapointe and Public Defender Diamond Litty.

Bakkedahl, who typically remains neutral in sheriff's races, took the unusual step of publicly endorsing Del Toro for the post, citing Pearson's questionable behavior as one of his reasons.

When Litty confronted Pearson about the videos and suggested they might make it tougher to convict the featured suspects, Litty said Pearson replied he would continue posting them because they were generating a lot of page views.

An ineffective social media strategy

Pearson was apparently borrowing a page from other sheriffs around the country who have gotten big social media responses to similar videos.

However, Pearson seemed to have miscalculated in at least a couple of important ways. While the videos generated a lot of clicks, it's safe to say most of them didn't come from registered voters in St. Lucie County.

The videos also did little to inform citizens about the big picture of whether law enforcement was making substantive improvements under Pearson's watch.

Yes, videos showed a few splashy arrests, but there was nothing to suggest whether crime rates were going up or down since he took office. Most people expect a sheriff's office to make arrests, so without any context, what he was doing just seemed self-promotional.

It's worth noting the media could have helped provide context for voters on his job performance, even though trends would have been hard to spot within such a short time window, but Pearson seemed to want complete control of the messaging about his office.

Pearson pinned a lot of his hopes on being perceived as DeSantis' preferred candidate in the race, even though the St. Lucie County Republican Executive Committee had endorsed Del Toro.

Pearson peppered the county with campaign signs touting himself as "the governor's choice." Yet DeSantis didn't endorse him before Tuesday's election, even though the governor made recommendations in dozens of other sheriff's races across the state.

That, more than anything, had to be a crippling blow for his campaign. Before his appointment to the sheriff's post, Pearson was a mid-level figure on the office's organizational flow chart. He was nowhere near the top of the command structure.

Being the pick of an extremely popular governor was — or at least could have been — the best thing Pearson had going for him.

For his part, DeSantis avoided media questions about Pearson as the controversies started to pile up. The governor may have realized supporting Pearson further would be a political liability for him.

Pearson couldn't shake repeated controversies

The Florida Department of Law Enforcement investigated Pearson a couple of times, once related to his role in an alleged "ghost campaign" that led the Florida Commission on Ethics to recommend sanctions against Mascara, then later over an infraction of elections law.

No arrests were made in either case. However, when you're a community's top law enforcement officer, being able to say you weren't arrested for alleged misconduct isn't terribly reassuring to constituents.

There were other political missteps, too.

Pearson submitted a written budget proposal that included about a $9 million increase to the sheriff's office's overall spending for the next fiscal year. In a county that's trending Republican more and more, that might not have been the most politically expeditious choice he could have made.

Pearson didn't have much luck winning over the rank-and-file employees in the sheriff's office, either. For the first time in its history, the St. Lucie County Deputies Association reached outside its ranks by endorsing Del Toro over Pearson.

His frustrations came out in a six-page letter he sent to St. Lucie County Republicans that was seen by many as a paranoid and delusional rant about conspiratorial forces aligning against him.

Like many other Republican office seekers, Pearson tried to compare himself to presidential candidate Donald Trump, which seldom seems to work. There's only one Trump, and his popularity isn't necessarily transferrable to others who want to pick up his mantle.

Meanwhile, Del Toro ran a campaign that, to a large degree, seemed to be centered on standing back and watching Pearson implode. Although Del Toro has a long track record of service in the Port St. Lucie Police Department, Pearson's supporters were unable to dig out evidence of serious wrongdoing.

They threw out some innuendo, but nothing that really resonated with voters.

After beating Pearson by a ratio of nearly 2-to-1, Del Toro will now face Democratic nominee Steven Giordano in the Nov. 5 general election.

Still a chance for redemption

That will leave Pearson in office for a few more months. He could use the time to scorch the Earth, taking reprisals against his perceived political enemies and using his position for personal gain.

Or, in the alternative, he could spend his remaining time as a true public servant, committing himself to the community's public safety in ways he didn't while he was preoccupied with winning votes.

Ending on a high note could improve how his tenure as sheriff is viewed years from now.

It's too late to rewrite the beginning and middle of Pearson's tenure as sheriff. The ending is still up to him.

This column reflects the opinion of Blake Fontenay. Contact him via email at bfontenay@gannett.com or at 772-232-5424.