

## Chaos at the County Building as Top Officials are Escorted Out

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BRADENTON — At least four Manatee County employees were escorted from the county administration building and put on administrative leave Thursday, according to multiple sources that were in the building at the time. Longtime Building and Development Services Director John Barnott was said to be among them.

Manatee County Administrator Scott Hopes did not respond to requests for comment or to confirm any actions undertaken by the county. Along with Barnott, Manatee County Code Enforcement Chief Jeff Bowman and two code enforcement supervisors—Tom Wooten and Chet Brown—were named by multiple sources as having been among those put on leave.

Almost immediately, conjecture began as to whether the actions were related to an internal investigation into alleged construction violations on a 50-acre, agriculturally-zoned property in Myakka City in which unpermitted improvements were made on land that was being advertised as the future site of what was once a Sarasota-based medieval fair operation.

The property in question is owned by a corporation called Mallaranny LLC, which is managed by Jeremy Croteau. Croteau, the president of the Sarasota Medieval Fair, is the son of Kathleen Croteau, who was said to also have an ownership interest in the land as well. In May, Ms. Croteau [resigned](#) as Sarasota County's top building official shortly after becoming involved in investigations into the site by the Florida Department of Transportation and the Manatee County Inspector General's Office.

In investigating the complaints by neighbors who say the unpermitted work negatively impacted the drainage on their properties, Manatee County Code Enforcement officer Tanya Shaw came to believe her superiors had acted inappropriately in the matter once they found out who the property owner was.

Shaw told The Bradenton Times in March that while no site plan for the property had ever been submitted to the county, the work that had been done on the property went well beyond what any permits and exemptions on file to that point would have allowed. Shaw said that her supervisors initially seemed intent to act but that their demeanor changed drastically once they found out who owned the property, beginning with her immediate supervisor—Wooten—who she said recognized Croteau's name before taking her to see their chief, Bowman.

Shaw said that Wooten told Bowman everything that had occurred up to that point, including who owned the property, and that Bowman instructed her to call the neighbor who'd filed the complaint and tell them that there were no violations found. Shaw refused and said that she was then told to close the case, which she also refused to do. At that point, Shaw says the case was handed to another code enforcement officer, Chet Brown, who complied and was seemingly rewarded when he was promoted to a supervisor role just days later.

When Shaw kept working the case, she was told by Wooten that because it was closed there was no need for her to continue doing any work on it. She asked that the directive be put in writing. Shaw said that at least two more complaints by neighbors occurred after the initial one had been closed but that those were also closed and without any additional investigation.

That may have been the end of the story had inquiries by Shaw not led to a number of outside agencies becoming involved, including the Florida Department of Transportation expressing concerns about traffic, and the Southwest Florida Water Management District and Florida Department of Environmental Protection expressing concerns about wetlands and other environmental issues.

By the time the story hit the press, the county's inspector general office—which has faced ongoing criticism for not more aggressively pursuing potential fraud cases—had launched an investigation and Barnott had promised accountability on the matter.