



COMPTROLLER'S INVESTIGATIVE REPORT

Knox County Government

August 8, 2025

Jason E. Mumpower
Comptroller of the Treasury



DIVISION OF INVESTIGATIONS



JASON E. MUMPOWER
Comptroller

August 8, 2025


Knox County Board of Commissioners
400 Main Street
Knoxville, TN 37092

Knox County Officials:

The Office of the Comptroller of the Treasury conducted an investigation of selected records of the Knox County Government, and the results are presented herein.

Copies of this report are being forwarded to Governor Bill Lee, the State Attorney General, the District Attorney Generals of the 5th and 6th Judicial Districts, certain state legislators, and various other interested parties. A copy of the report is available for public inspection in our Office and may be viewed at <http://www.comptroller.tn.gov/ia/>.

Sincerely,



Jason E. Mumpower
Comptroller of the Treasury

JEM/MLC

INVESTIGATIVE REPORT

Knox County Government

The Office of the Comptroller of the Treasury investigated allegations of malfeasance related to Knox County Government. The investigation was initiated after Knox County Internal Audit personnel reported questionable disbursements. The investigation was limited to selected records for the period January 2024 through April 2025. The results of the investigation were communicated with the Office of the District Attorney General of the 5th Judicial District, who was appointed as *Pro Tem* in this matter pursuant to Tenn. Code Ann. § 8-7-106.

BACKGROUND



Knox County (county) is governed by a county mayor, who exercises all county executive and administrative functions, and an elected eleven-member county commission that acts as the legislative body. The county commission authorizes policies, including those governing county vehicle use and travel, and these policies are binding on all county departments and offices, including the offices of other county elected officials, unless otherwise noted. County policies can only be amended by a county commission vote.

The county mayor, an elected official, oversees the government's daily operations for departments including public works, finance, health, parks and recreation, human resources, risk management, technology, and libraries. The county departments have approximately 245 vehicles available for employees to use on official business.

The county trustee, an elected official, serves as the treasurer and primary investment administrator of the county's funds and manages property tax collection efforts. The trustee is responsible for sending out tax statements, collecting property taxes, and issuing receipts. The trustee has five satellite locations throughout the county. When a property owner fails to pay their property taxes, the county may initiate a legal process to recover the debt, which can ultimately result in the county selling the property in order to recover the delinquent taxes. The trustee's office has six leased vehicles available for employees to use on official business. In August 2024, a Global Positioning System (GPS) was installed in most of the leased vehicles.

The county property assessor, an elected official, appraises and assesses taxable real and personal property in the county that is not appraised by the state. The assessor's office has approximately

14 vehicles for employees to use on official business. As of February 2025, GPS was installed in 10 of the 14 assessor's office vehicles.

The county clerk, an elected official, employs deputy clerks to perform many of the clerk's office's daily operations, including registering vehicles, issuing vehicle tags and titles, renewing vehicle tags, and collecting vehicle sales tax. The county clerk has five satellite locations throughout the county and has three vehicles available for employees to use on official business.

RESULTS OF INVESTIGATION

1. THE FORMER DIRECTOR OF KNOX COUNTY TRUSTEE OPERATIONS, JASON DOBBINS, USED HIS OFFICIAL POSITION AND OFFICE RESOURCES FOR HIS AND HIS BUSINESS PARTNER'S FINANCIAL GAIN TOTALING AT LEAST \$102,153

The former director of trustee operations, Jason Dobbins, used his official position and trustee's office resources for his and his business partner's financial gain, totaling at least \$102,153. Dobbins supervised several employees and managed documentation related to delinquent property tax properties. The trustee terminated Dobbins' employment on April 14, 2025. The *Knox County, Tennessee Code of Ethics* states, "No public officer or county employee shall corruptly use or attempt to use his or her official position or any property or resource which may be within his or her trust, or perform his or her official duties, to secure a special privilege, benefit, or exemption for himself, herself, or others."

Investigators noted the following abuse by Dobbins of his official position and trustee's office resources:

A. Prospect List Transactions

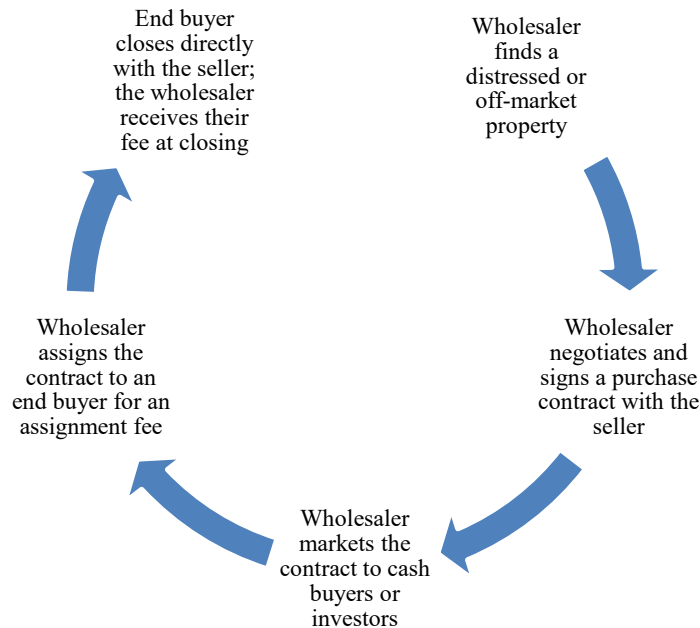
In the summer of 2024, Dobbins used his official position to obtain property owner contact information for himself and his business partner to purchase two delinquent property tax properties for approximately \$3,733 and later sell the properties in March 2025 for \$67,000. Both Dobbins and his business partner were named as property owners on the deeds after initial purchases and prior to the March 2025 sale. Dobbins stated that he obtained the contact information from a "prospect list" of properties eligible for Tax Sale 25, not available to the public, which was subsequently shared with his business partner, resulting in a financial gain of \$63,267. Dobbins stated he did not call the property owner, use his funds to purchase the properties, or receive any money after the properties were sold, but investigators could not confirm this information.

B. Wholesale Transactions

According to Dobbins, he personally profited approximately \$38,125 in 2024 by performing wholesale property transactions with his business partner, some of which were delinquent property tax properties. Dobbins estimated that he wholesaled roughly six properties with his business partner, and four of the properties were on the county delinquent property tax list

released to the public. Wholesaling is a business model in which someone (wholesaler) puts a property under contract and then sells that contract to another buyer (often an investor) for a profit without buying the property themselves. Dobbins stated that he and his business partner used information already available to the public for these transactions. However, Dobbins, in his official position, would have had access to information about the delinquent property tax properties prior to the delinquent property tax list being made public.

WHOLESALE ILLUSTRATION



C. Personal Use of a County Vehicle

From August 2024 through February 2025, Dobbins used his assigned county vehicle for personal use outside of normal business hours without authorization, totaling at least \$761 using state mileage rates. On multiple occasions, Dobbins traveled in his assigned county vehicle outside of normal business hours to a gym, restaurants, a convenience center, and shopping centers for personal purposes. In one instance, Dobbins traveled to a family residence in Bristol, Virginia, while on leave status in a county vehicle. The *Knox County Fleet Safety Program* manual requires that county vehicles be used exclusively for legitimate county business and strictly prohibits personal use of a county vehicle.

The following table summarizes the known financial gain by Dobbins or his business partner from Dobbins' abuse of his official position and trustee's office resources:

Summary of Financial Gain		
A.	<u>Prospect List Transactions</u>	\$ 63,267
B.	<u>Wholesale Transactions</u>	\$ 38,125
C.	<u>Personal Use of a County Vehicle</u>	\$ 761
Total Financial Gain		\$ 102,153

2. THE KNOX COUNTY PROPERTY ASSESSOR, PHIL BALLARD, IMPROPERLY USED A COUNTY VEHICLE WHILE ALSO RECEIVING AN ANNUAL TRAVEL ALLOWANCE

The county property assessor, Phil Ballard, improperly used a county vehicle while also receiving an annual travel allowance of \$7,600.06. In addition, investigators determined that Ballard, prior to using a county vehicle, was aware that he should not use county vehicles while receiving the travel allowance. According to Article I, Section 2.2 of the *Knox County, Tennessee Code of Ordinances*, “Whenever an elected county official is not assigned a county vehicle, such elected official shall receive, on a monthly basis, an allowance for travel reimbursement as set in the annual budgets and/or salary suits of said county elected officials as approved in accordance with law, consistent with policies and regulations presently in effect.” Investigators could not determine whether Ballard used the county vehicle exclusively for county business purposes since the vehicle was not equipped with GPS, despite being required by county policy.

Ballard used a county vehicle for multiple trips while receiving an annually budgeted county travel allowance to use his personal vehicle, totaling \$7,600.06 over 26 pay periods. From September 13, 2024, through January 10, 2025, investigators found roughly 150 instances of Ballard using a county vehicle on county video recordings. In some instances, the county vehicle decal was missing (**Refer to Exhibit 1**). In January 2025, Ballard requested that his travel allowance be rescinded. Ballard paid back the travel allowance he earned from September 2024 through January 2025 of \$2,776.95, from payroll deductions on three paychecks dated 4-25-2025, 5-9-2025, and 5-23-2025.

Exhibit 1



Left picture – property assessor’s vehicle was not marked as a county vehicle
Right picture – property assessor’s vehicle was properly marked as a county vehicle

3. THE KNOX COUNTY TRUSTEE IMPROPERLY USED A COUNTY VEHICLE AND AUTHORIZED QUESTIONABLE TRAVEL EXPENSES

The county trustee improperly used a county vehicle and authorized questionable travel expenses, as follows:

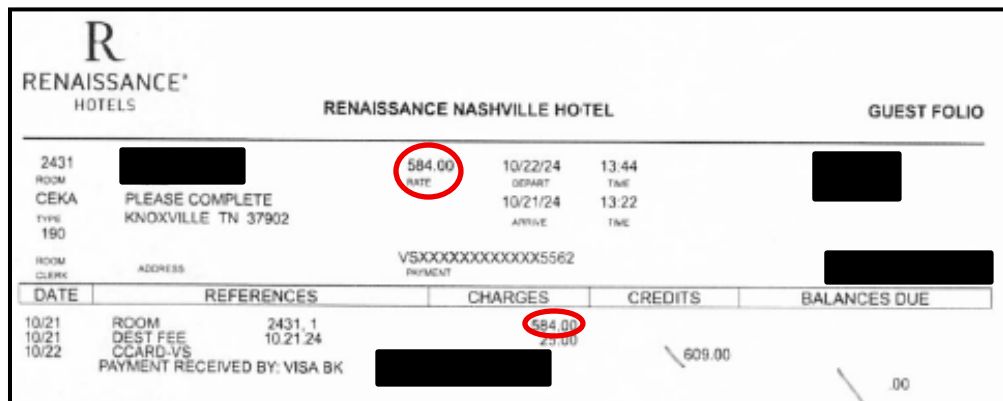
A. Improper County Vehicle Use

According to Article I, Section 2.2 of the *Knox County, Tennessee Code of Ordinances*, “Whenever an elected county official is not assigned a county vehicle, such elected official shall receive, on a monthly basis, an allowance for travel reimbursement as set in the annual budgets and/or salary suits of said county elected officials as approved in accordance with law, consistent with policies and regulations presently in effect.” From March 2024 through November 2024, the trustee used a county vehicle for five trips to attend training and meetings in Nashville while receiving an annually budgeted county travel allowance for not using a county vehicle, totaling \$4,999.80, over 26 pay periods.

B. Questionable Travel Expenses

On multiple occasions, the trustee and several of his employees failed to choose the least expensive travel option for lodging, incurring at least \$3,781 in costs that exceeded the county rate for hotel rooms (**Refer to Exhibit 2**). The county travel policy notes that there may be extenuating circumstances wherein travel expenses beyond the amount of the county rates required by the policy are necessary. However, the policy states, “In most cases, the least expensive travel option should be chosen. In the event the most expensive option is chosen, the reason for that should be documented”. Additionally, lodging expenses will be made up to the maximum rate indicated in the Travel Regulations reimbursement rate schedule (tied to the U.S. General Services Administration’s reimbursement schedule). For each of the reviewed trips, the trustee signed his approval for “higher than normal lodging”; however, no evidentiary support was included in the travel documentation for the policy exception. Therefore, investigators could not determine whether the expense was appropriate or reasonable.

Exhibit 2



R
 RENAISSANCE
 HOTELS

RENAISSANCE NASHVILLE HOTEL

GUEST FOLIO

2431		584.00	10/22/24	13:44	
ROOM		RATE	DEPART	TIME	
CEKA	PLEASE COMPLETE		10/21/24	13:22	
TYPE	KNOXVILLE TN 37902		ARRIVE	TIME	
190					
ROOM		VSXXXXXXXXXXXX5562			
CLERK	ADDRESS	PAYMENT			
DATE	REFERENCES	CHARGES	CREDITS	BALANCES DUE	
10/21	ROOM 2431, 1	584.00			
10/21	DEST FEE 10.21.24				
10/22	CCARD-VS				
	PAYMENT RECEIVED BY: VISA BK			609.00	
					.00

Trustee’s 10/21/2024 hotel invoice reflects a \$584 nightly room rate instead of the county rate of \$248

On April 28, 2025, the trustee issued a \$3,500.00 check from his personal funds to reimburse the county for amounts he estimated as improper county vehicle use and questionable travel expenses.

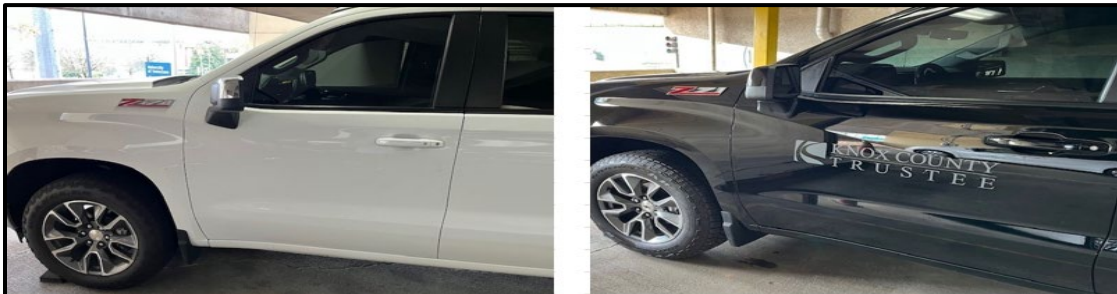
4. MULTIPLE KNOX COUNTY EMPLOYEES IMPROPERLY USED COUNTY VEHICLES FOR THEIR WORK COMMUTE AND PERSONAL ERRANDS

Investigators reviewed the use of certain vehicles for all county offices, excluding the sheriff's office and Knox County Schools, and determined that multiple employees improperly used county vehicles for their work commute and to run personal errands during normal business hours. The *Knox County Fleet Safety Program* manual requires that county vehicles be used exclusively for legitimate county business and strictly prohibits personal use of a county vehicle. Improper county vehicle use by county employees was noted in the following county offices:

A. Trustee

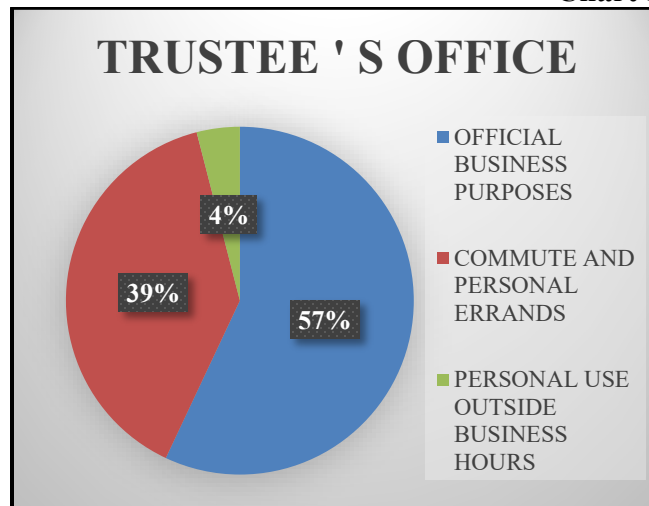
Multiple employees in the county trustee's office, including Dobbins, used county vehicles for their work commute and for personal errands during normal business hours. Trustee's office vehicles were not always labeled as county vehicles (**Refer to Exhibit 3**), which is not proper government practice. The trustee authorized several employees to use county vehicles for their work commute but did not properly document how it benefited the county, as required by the *Knox County Fleet Safety Program*. In some instances, employees used county vehicles for trips to restaurants, convenience stores, shopping centers, etc. GPS was not installed on most of these vehicles until August 2024. Investigators assessed (**Refer to Chart 1**) that all trustee's office vehicles were used approximately 57% of the time for official business, 39% for commuting and personal errands during regular business hours, and 4% for personal business after regular business hours (**Refer to Finding 1C**).

Exhibit 3



Left picture - trustee's office vehicle was not marked as a county vehicle
Right picture - trustee's office vehicle was properly marked as a county vehicle

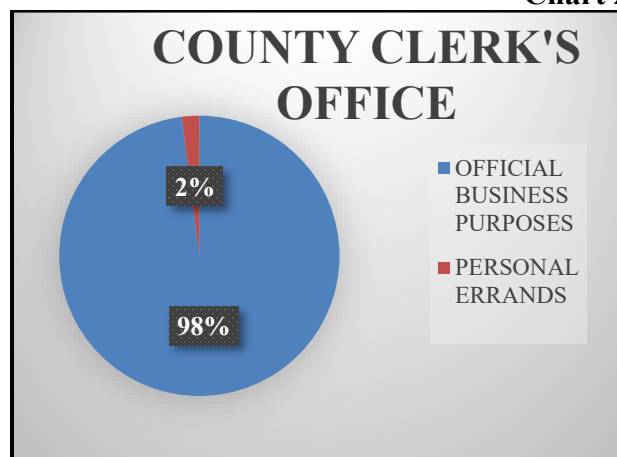
Chart 1



B. County Clerk

In some instances, county clerk employees (couriers) were allowed to use county vehicles for trips to their personal residences during regular business hours. Investigators assessed that all county clerk's office vehicles were used approximately 98% of the time for official business and 2% for personal errands during regular business hours (**Refer to Chart 2**).

Chart 2



C. County Mayor

An employee of the county mayor's office consistently used a county vehicle to commute to and from his personal residence during his work lunch break. The county mayor did not authorize the employee's personal use of the county vehicle. The employee was subsequently suspended for ten business days without pay and required to complete ethics training.

Investigators reviewed the use of five county mayor vehicles, and this was the only employee found to use a county vehicle for personal use.

On August 6, 2025, the Knox County Grand Jury indicted Jason Dobbins on two counts of Official Misconduct and Phil Ballard on one count of Official Misconduct.

The charges and allegations contained in the indictment are merely accusations of criminal conduct, and not evidence. The defendant is presumed innocent unless and until proven guilty beyond a reasonable doubt and convicted through due process of law.

[Knox County Government Investigation Exhibit](#)

INTERNAL CONTROL AND COMPLIANCE DEFICIENCIES

Our investigation revealed the following deficiencies in internal control and compliance, some of which contributed to multiple county employees improperly using county vehicles for personal use without prompt detection. These deficiencies included:

Deficiency 1: County officials failed to properly administer the use of county vehicles

Investigators noted the following deficiencies in the administration of county vehicle use resulting from a lack of oversight by county officials:

- A. In some instances, county officials did not equip county vehicles with a GPS tracking system. The *Knox County Fleet Safety Program* requires all county vehicles to be equipped with a GPS tracking system provided by the vendor under contract with Knox County. Since some county vehicles were not equipped with GPS and employees could not provide use logs, investigators were unable to determine the purposes for which some county vehicles were used.
- B. Multiple county employees with no documented emergency or other Internal Revenue Service exempted job responsibilities used county vehicles to commute to and from work and for other personal use; however, the economic fringe benefit derived from such use was not calculated and reported on their Forms W-2, as required by Internal Revenue Service regulations. While some of these county employees obtained approval to commute to and from work in their assigned county vehicle, county officials did not always calculate a written cost analysis to establish and document that a take-home county vehicle served to benefit the public purpose through the efficient delivery of county services, as required by the *Knox County Fleet Safety Program*. County officials should ensure county vehicles are only used for the benefit of the county and in compliance with Internal Revenue Service

regulations and county policy, and county officials should report any non-exempt personal use of vehicles as a fringe benefit on employees' Forms W-2.

- C. County officials did not always mark county vehicles as property of Knox County. Sound government practice dictates that county officials mark and identify all machinery and equipment as the county's property.

Knox County officials indicated that they have corrected or intend to correct these deficiencies.
