

FBI not talking; SLT officer on leave without knowing why

By Kathryn Reed

It's been more than three months since South Lake Tahoe police Officer Johnny Poland was stripped of his badge and gun. He still doesn't know why.

"There has been no reportable movement," Police Chief Brian Uhler told *Lake Tahoe News*.

That means whatever is going on with the federal investigation is not being made public because later in the conversation Uhler said, "We are kept apprised as there are developments."



Johnny Poland

Gina Swankie with the FBI office in Sacramento said, "I have nothing to offer you." It's normal for the FBI not to comment on any investigation until it is complete.

Poland told *Lake Tahoe News* no one has asked him a single question regarding the investigation in the entire time he has been on paid administrative leave.

"Officially they haven't told me I'm under federal investigation," Poland said. "They never said I was under investigation. They said it was a pending IA (internal affairs) investigation. I haven't gotten an IA."

For now, taxpayers in the city of South Lake Tahoe are paying for Poland to stay home, raise his kids, take them to school – do all those things a stay at home dad doesn't usually get paid to do. His benefits have been fully funded as well since he was put on leave in mid-November.

“He is under federal criminal investigation. It would be inappropriate for him to continue to serve in a day-to-day capacity,” City Manager Tony O'Rourke told *Lake Tahoe News* in November. “It doesn't reflect any guilt. It reflects the process that needs to run its course so we can determine if there were any serious violations of the law.”

But it is still not public information what this peace officer is accused of.

The police department classifies this case as “conduct unbecoming”. This list gives a glimpse of the SLTPD investigations from 2009 until Poland was put on leave.

The city explains “internally” as any city employee may have complained about a police officer, not necessarily an officer against another police officer. “Externally” means any member of the public submitted a complaint about a police officer.

It's also not known how much longer the investigation will go on.

The last time Poland had a run-in with superiors – not the feds – he was out of work for nearly three years. He had been fired in 2007, then won the wrongful termination case in 2009. The trouble began in November 2006 when Poland was accused of mishandling a lockdown situation at South Tahoe High School.

With Poland's absence and the city's desire to protect residents and visitors, it means the police department is spending beyond what is in the budget. Overtime is necessary at times to keep cops on the road.

Uhler said to keep paying Poland and have officers on the street, it might mean less is spent on equipment or other purchases.

If Poland is found guilty of whatever charges the investigation centers on, he would not have to pay back the money he collected in the time he is out. But by the same token, if no charges are brought against him or he is found not guilty, his reputation and the potential of him being trusted by the public and his colleagues has been diminished just by the secretive investigation – possibly to the point of him not being able to return to work or being able to find work with another law enforcement agency.

Quitting would benefit the city. It would mean having Poland off the payroll. But it would not make the investigation go away. To date, the city has not tried to negotiate with Poland to get him to move on – no matter what happens with the federal investigation.