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D.M. calls off efforts to find e-mail tipster

An e-mailer said city employees had improper material on computers

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Des Moines officials Thursday called off a police investigation into the identity of a person who claimed that three City Hall employees kept inappropriate material on their workplace computers.

The anonymous e-mail, which triggered an internal investigation that later cleared the employees, was "about the most cowardly thing I can think of for someone to do," Assistant City Manager Mike Matthes said.

The city has a contract with Alexander Open Systems of Overland Park, Kan., for computer services. Matthes estimated the investigation prompted by the e-mail cost about \$2,000 and noted that nearly a dozen employees from five departments helped investigate the claim.

Matthes said the search, which included deleted files, found no pornography.

The e-mail was sent Monday to city leaders within minutes after the council discussed protections for whistle-blowers in light of a salary scandal at a central Iowa job training agency that was made public by a state employee. The council asked city employees for suggested ways to assure that whistle-blowers are taken seriously and that their jobs are protected.

But the potential for malicious tips is problematic and costly, Councilman Bob Mahaffey said. The city's policy on whistle-blowers must include ways to evaluate anonymous tips before tax money is spent to investigate, he said.

"There's always going to be people out there trying to detrimentally attack people who are in the public," he said.

Stephen Kohn of the nonprofit National Whistleblower Center in Washington, D.C., said a police probe aimed at the identity of the tipster could discourage others from coming forward with legitimate concerns. He also noted that the inability to find inappropriate images on the city computers does not prove that the tip was false.

The city "shouldn't use this incident to discourage reporting," he said. "If they opened an investigation, it would be disastrous."

The whistle-blower center fields roughly 1,000 tips of corruption and underhanded behavior each year, about half of which are quickly dismissed because they don't meet certain criteria, Kohn said. Des Moines, too, must develop a way to determine which tips are credible, he noted.

"It was their call to investigate. They didn't have to," he said.

The e-mail, which was sent through a private account to City Council members, alleged that a high-ranking employee "has porn sites on his computer because I have seen it."

The e-mail also alleged that money has been misspent and named two other employees, but provided no other details.

The last line of the letter said: "You have been notified."

Matthes on Wednesday asked police to help expose the sender.

He canceled the search on Thursday, saying that it would be difficult to find the person and that there was no plan in place to punish him or her.

Councilwoman Christine Hensley said false tips could become "a huge problem."

"There's got to be a balance," she said. "You've got to be able to look at the complaints in an unbiased manner." test

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