

Home >> News >> Politics and Government >> Nevada

Ethics complaints, not rape claim, could end Nevada sheriff's reign

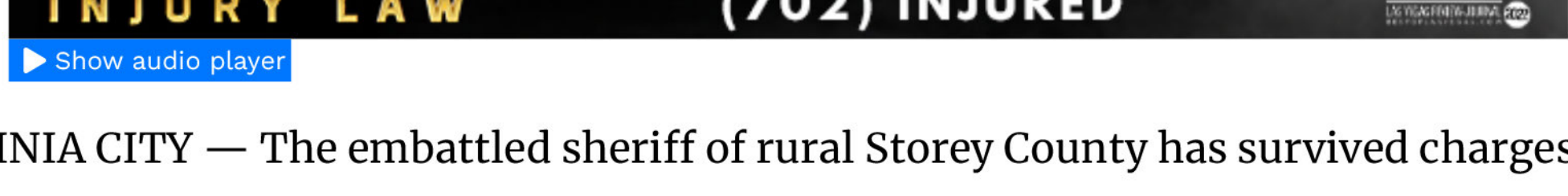


Storey County Sheriff Gerald Antinoro in his Virginia City office with one of his re-election campaign signs. An ethics complaint against him says the sign is among several campaign materials that violates a restriction on using the trappings of office.

By Bill Dentzer Las Vegas Review-Journal

February 8, 2019 - 11:07 am

Don't miss the big stories. Like us on Facebook: Follow 352K



VIRGINIA CITY — The embattled sheriff of rural Storey County has survived charges of workplace sexual harassment and discrimination, allegations of sexual crimes and three confirmed state ethics violations.

But what might finally prove Sheriff Gerald Antinoro's undoing are three new pending ethics cases — on balance, among the less serious allegations he has faced — that put him closer to being removed from office than even the recall election he survived in 2017.

The sheriff has twice been found to have willfully committed ethics violations by the state Commission on Ethics, and a third willful violation would trigger action by the commission to seek his removal in the courts. Such a process would likely be lengthy and laborious, and the sheriff said recently that he would challenge any effort to remove him.

But that might be the least of Sheriff Gerald Antinoro's legal woes, all of which he attributes to efforts of "detractors" fighting him for control of the county.

"Pretty much all of them are connected in one way or another, yes," he said in an interview in his Virginia City office last month.

All of the six pending or previously decided ethics complaints against Antinoro claim he used various trappings of his office to his advantage in personal matters or failed to disclose potential conflicts.

Besides the complaints, Storey County's top uniformed officer, elected to a third four-year term last June, is the target of a federal civil rights lawsuit filed that alleges sexual harassment and workplace discrimination.

RJ POLITICS

Team coverage from Las Vegas, Carson City and DC Sign up for our free RJ Politics newsletter.

EMAIL SIGN UP

By signing up you agree to our Privacy Policy and Terms of Service. Unsubscribe at any time.

The harassment dates to 2015. An internal investigation conducted by an outside party in 2016 confirmed that the sheriff violated harassment laws in his conduct toward his former chief deputy, Melanie Keener. Antinoro has denied Keener's claims of discrimination and harassment and moved to dismiss the case.

Another ongoing lawsuit involves defamation claims filed against Antinoro by one of his chief antagonists, Lance Gilman, a county commissioner, brothel owner and principal of the Tahoe-Reno Industrial Center, a 104,000-acre industrial park in Storey County billed as the largest in the country. TRIC is home to major facilities operated by Tesla, Google and other technology companies, and business activity there is reinventing commerce in the sparsely populated, rustic county whose last major business rush arguably was the 19th-century silver mining boom.



Gilman and business associates are behind some of the ethics complaints. They also backed the recall effort and have asked law enforcement for investigations into the sheriff's actions and fitness for office.

"His conduct ought to be unacceptable for a man wearing a badge," said Kris Thompson, business manager for Gilman at the industrial park, who filed two of the latest ethics complaints.

Thompson cites alleged activities by the sheriff, as well as other officers under his command, that are graphically depicted in sworn depositions taken in the federal civil rights case, including those of current and former Storey County deputies and Antinoro himself. The deponents describe an illicit affair between a supervising deputy and a department trainee, acts of voyeurism, Antinoro's patronage of a Las Vegas swinger club, partner-swapping, pandering and sex with multiple partners.

"I admit to issues in my life and things that have gone on in my bedroom with consenting adults," Antinoro told the Review-Journal when asked about the behaviors outlined in the depositions. "What goes on in my bedroom with consenting adults is nobody's business. But these guys want to turn it into a circus and try and create something that there's not."

The sheriff's legal tangles

Storey County Sheriff Gerald Antinoro faces legal issues on a number of fronts. He is the target of multiple state ethics complaints, two reports of willful violations of charges of defamation, sexual harassment and discrimination and more serious allegations of rape, in addition to questions about because off-hours activities.

Ethics complaints Three violations have been confirmed, and three complaints are pending. Most involve charges that Antinoro arranged the presence of a spouse at an ethics hearing or in private or campaign-related matters. Two of the confirmed violations were deemed willful. A third willful finding would prompt the Nevada Commission on Ethics to seek his removal in court.

Civil suits A Storey County commissioner who is also a county brothel owner and major industrial park principal sued Antinoro for defamation based on comments the sheriff made publicly about the health of workers at the commissioner's brothel. The sheriff has filed a counterclaim.

Sexual harassment Antinoro former chief deputy filed a federal sexual harassment and discrimination lawsuit against him.

Other allegations Depositions given to the discrimination case refer to allegations of rape in Lodi, California, in 2015 and in Sparks in 2006. The former in Lodi case was settled for \$100,000. The rape in Sparks by three men in a motel there. No criminal charges have been filed. The Sparks incident, allegedly involving Antinoro and another Storey County deputy, was not reported until 2016, beyond the statute of limitations for sex crimes at the time.

Lifestyle Deposed in the civil case, Antinoro and others describe the sheriff's visits to Las Vegas swingers clubs for expensive sex encounters of pandering, heavily sexually charged banter and sexual relations with supermodels, and sex with multiple partners.

Source: Review-Journal reporters. Illustration: Bill Dentzer/Review-Journal

Criminal allegations

The depictions go beyond acts of consensual sex and include allegations of rapes orchestrated or carried out by the 54-year-old lawman, including an alleged 2015 gang rape of a woman he was dating. According to the victim's deposition, Antinoro arranged the attack by three men at a motel in Lodi, California, so he could watch.

The woman was deposed in the civil case but has not filed criminal charges and has resisted cooperation with law enforcement, professing fear of the sheriff in her deposition. Antinoro called her accusations "a complete and utter fabrication."

Asked if he had been questioned by law enforcement about the incident, Antinoro said he had "talked to a whole bunch of people" about it but declined to give specifics. An accusation of a 2006 rape in Sparks, reported for the first time in 2014, was not investigated because the statute of limitations had expired when the victim came forward. Antinoro has never been criminally charged.

The state of Nevada in 2015 extended the statute of limitations in rape cases from four years to 20.

Letters to attorney general

A lawyer for Gilman's industrial park partner asked the attorney general's office in April 2018 to investigate the various accusations. The office's subsequent review, which included FBI interviews of alleged victims, resulted in what the attorney general's office described as contradictory findings, statutory dead ends or non-criminal activity.

Last August, Keener's lawyer in the sexual harassment case, wrote again to the attorney general, as well as the U.S. Attorney in Reno and the district attorneys in Storey County and San Joaquin County in California, where Lodi is located, to outline alleged criminal behavior and "address the apparent lack of any meaningful investigation" by law enforcement.

The AG's office responded in October saying it could not pursue matters further, citing insufficient evidence, contradictory findings, limited jurisdiction and uncooperative witnesses. The matter became a campaign issue in the race for governor and attorney general because Republican candidates Adam Laxalt and Wes Duncan did not denounce Antinoro's endorsement of them. Laxalt and Duncan both lost their races.

Within days of that letter, the Commission on Ethics returned its second finding of a willful ethics violation by the sheriff.

Ethics complaints

Storey County officials, deposed in the civil case, said Antinoro has been the cause of at least 10 lawsuits or complaints since he joined the sheriff's department in 2006 from previous work as chief of enforcement for the Nevada Transportation Authority in Las Vegas, and prior to that, as a police officer in West Wendover in Elko County.

The three pending ethics cases stem from complaints filed in May, July and November of 2018. Two are related to Antinoro's re-election campaign in June. Antinoro defeated Mike Cullen, a Carson City sheriff's office sergeant, who filed one of the pending complaints in July claiming that Antinoro misused the trappings of his office by appearing in uniform at three campaign debates.

Antinoro also appeared in uniform during Virginia City's Memorial Day parade, riding in a patrol car at the start and appearing a second time later in the same parade on a float, according to the complaint.

Additionally, Cullen cited a weekly radio show Antinoro began hosting in May. On his third show, which aired the day of the election, Antinoro talked with guests "about the election, mudslinging and detractors," and one of his guests spoke of a "real clear choice" in that day's contest.

Antinoro, according to Cullen's complaint, also solicited donations to support the program during the broadcast and called out sponsors by name to "reward his friends and political donors."

The commission accepted the complaint for review in September. The commission does not comment on or confirm pending actions or its decisions to investigate or not.

Sheriff responds

The commission's investigation is pending. The sheriff will have an opportunity to challenge the complaints as part of the commission's review. But in an interview, Antinoro denied that he wore his official uniform to the debates and said it is his custom to wear a modified or "soft" uniform — typically, jeans, polo shirt and a badge he had specially made. That's what he wore in the parade, he said, calling his activities "pretty standard."

"As a general rule, I lead the parade through town, at least all of the big parades, whether it's political season or not," Antinoro said. "I go through town in the parade leading it in a patrol car and everything and then I circle back around and I park here at the office and I'll come out during the political things or if there's something that I'm doing in the parade."

Antinoro also cited a 2014 decision by the commission to drop similar charges on electioneering in uniform against the Elko County sheriff for lack of clear guidance in the law.

A second complaint filed in May and accepted for review in July also cites Antinoro's inappropriate use of uniform and badge in billboards and other campaign materials, saying it constituted "a visual endorsement, affirmation and sanction of his personal reelection campaign for Sheriff and provides an unfair advantage to him at government cost."

The third pending complaint, filed in November, was accepted by the commission Dec. 31. It claims 14 ethics violations for Antinoro's repeated failure to disclose potential conflicts and abstain from acting in the sheriff's official capacity to regulate brothel activity because he's involved in litigation with a business he is supposed to be regulating. The sheriff's office issues work cards to brothel workers and the sheriff sits on the county's brothel licensing board.

The conflicts cited in that complaint arise from the disputes playing out in area courts, before the Ethics Commission and in the community at large between Antinoro and Gilman. In 2016, Gilman filed a defamation case against Antinoro for telling a local blogger that Gilman's Mustang Ranch did not have necessary medical clearance.

Antinoro subsequently filed an ethics complaint against Gilman as a county commissioner that was dropped. He has also filed a counterclaim in Gilman's defamation case.

The November ethics complaint says Antinoro continued to participate in regulating brothels without acknowledging the potential conflict or abstaining due to the ongoing litigation. Thompson filed the complaint and the earlier one from May on Antinoro's campaign materials.

"To claim that there's an ethical violation there by trying to bootstrap it onto the fact that he's suing me, it's just one more attempt to try and keep me from doing my job," Antinoro said.

Thompson cited Antinoro's counterclaim, long-standing personal animus, and the fact that Antinoro since November has recused himself from actions related to brothel regulation.

"You can't sue someone and then be making quasi-judicial or regulatory decisions about their business," Thompson said. "You can't have a clear personal animus or hatred."

Confirmed violations

Among the decided cases, the commission last fall found the sheriff breached ethics law against use of government property for personal business by opening his office on a Saturday to allow his wife to meet her ex-husband for a child visitation appointment. Antinoro contended that such accommodations are made for other members of the public. But the commission found his action constituted an "unwarranted privilege" extended to his wife.

The commission deemed that incident a willful violation, Antinoro's second. His first came in May 2017, when the commission ruled that he improperly used official sheriff's department stationery for a letter endorsing Michele Fiore in her 2016 bid for Congress. Fiore now serves on the Las Vegas City Council.

Both findings came with fines. An earlier complaint was resolved by stipulated agreement and no finding of willful violation. In 2014, a deputy running for sheriff filed Antinoro filed a complaint when Antinoro barred the deputy from attending a campaign-related community event on his own time.

The commission acknowledged that the move was potentially a First Amendment violation but did not constitute a willful ethics violation as defined in state code.

Antinoro maintains that his accusers are using a "bastardization of rumors" to have law enforcement, the courts or the ethics panel do what county voters have declined to do — remove him from office. He continues to have strong backing in the county and counts local business people, an active local blogger, lawmakers and police officials from other jurisdictions among supporters. He won re-election in 2018 by a 53-44 margin and beat back a well-funded recall effort the year before with nearly 60 percent of the vote.

"I've been doing this job for over 30 years," he said. "If I was this individual that these people are trying to present me as, would I have been able to retain it that long? The people of the county here locally see through their nonsense. But that's not good enough for them because they don't want me in this position."

Thompson said the actions by the sheriff depicted in various depositions and other records would prompt anyone who has seen them to call for Antinoro's removal.

"We know the conduct that is in that sworn testimony, including his own conduct that he's admitted to," Thompson said. "When we're bringing the best companies in the world to work in Storey County, we think law enforcement should be held to a better standard than what this guy has established for himself."

Contact Bill Dentzer at bdentzer@reviewjournal.com or 775-461-0661. Follow @Dentzernews on Twitter.