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**License probe extends to Ryan pal; ex-inspector general for secretary of state subject of investigation**

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Staff reporters

When Dean Bauer was forced to resign as police chief in Kankakee, the office he occupied for more than 14 years was cleaned up for his replacement. In fact, successor Tim Nugent recalled, the place was spotless.

"Every file was empty. There was nothing there, no personnel files. It was empty," Nugent said in a recent interview. "I had a desk, a phone and a chair."

But Bauer didn't leave empty-handed. In its final days in 1985, the administration of outgoing Kankakee Mayor Thomas J. Ryan cut Bauer a $ 10,800 check for accrued sick time. The payment, equal to about $ 17,000 in today's pocketbooks, was condemned as illegal by the new city attorney.

Such acts in the final days of Bauer's Kankakee tenure -- and the choices he began making thereafter -- epitomized a career sometimes overshadowed by politics and personal loyalties, Bauer's critics said in interviews.

It's been a career filled with 30 years of patronage posts, jobs connected by just two threads: current Gov. George Ryan and his brother, Thomas J. Ryan.

Bauer, a lifelong pal of the Ryan brothers, is the subject of a federal investigation into whether evidence of license-selling that emerged during George Ryan's tenure as secretary of state got buried to protect a steady stream of bribe money heading into Ryan's campaign.

Bauer, reportedly suffering from cancer, has not been charged with a crime and has denied any wrongdoing.

From 1992 to 1998, Bauer was George Ryan's handpicked inspector general -- a lawman held out as an independent watchdog in charge of internal corruption probes. He has been criticized for repeatedly missing evidence of license-selling that federal prosecutors later turned into a string of indictments.

Federal prosecutors have said at least $ 170,000 in bribes collected by secretary of state workers and supervisors during Bauer's tenure was churned into campaign contributions for his boss.

The bribes bought licenses for hundreds, if not thousands, of unqualified truckers on the nation's roadways, including Ricardo Guzman, prosecutors have said. Guzman, involved in a fiery 1994 accident that killed six children outside Milwaukee, exercised his Fifth Amendment right to remain silent more than 20 times during state court testimony about his licensing last year.

The governor would not comment Thursday on his relationship with Bauer or why he picked someone without a career law enforcement background for such a sensitive position.

He once again apologized for license-selling that happened on his watch.

Bauer, 71, has declined to comment and could not be reached at his Kankakee home Thursday.

He joined George Ryan's staff in November 1991, after being out of law enforcement for about six years. By Jan. 1, 1992, he was inspector general.

Between his stint as Kankakee police chief and his work with George Ryan, Bauer took a top post with one of the state's most politically connected public works contractors: Azzarrelli Construction Co. of Kankakee.

The firm and its vice president, John Azzarrelli, were convicted in federal court for mail fraud and bid-rigging seven years before Bauer left the Kankakee police.

The conviction hardly hurt the firm, which is something of an institution in Kankakee. Azzarrelli's ties to another Kankakee institution -- the Ryan family -- were credited with helping to keep it strong despite its legal problems.

With Bauer on the company payroll, Azzarrelli boosted George Ryan's 1990 bid for secretary of state by giving the Republican's campaign $ 10,000, one of the largest donations George Ryan received in the race.

The $ 10,000, coupled with Azzarrelli's federal convictions, caused a tiny stink for the Ryan campaign but did no real damage. Ryan also wasn't hurt by the fact that he had written a character letter for Azzarrelli to the sentencing judge in the builder's corruption case.

By the time Ryan moved into the secretary of state's office, taking Bauer with him, most of Azzarrelli's problems were long gone. Despite its conviction, Azzarrelli had netted all or parts of $ 100 million in road contracts during George Ryan's tenure as lieutenant governor from 1983 to 1990.

Even before he left police work for his job with the connected contractor, Bauer was widely known in Kankakee as a longtime GOP loyalist.

Bauer regularly lined up shoulder-to-shoulder with Kankakee's political elite for staged photos to promote Thomas J. Ryan's annual charity golf outing. As chief of police, Bauer campaigned for Republican candidates.

He was often at party headquarters on election night and was a mainstay at other GOP events. When Ryan was sworn in as lieutenant governor in 1983, Bauer was there to share the inaugural festivities with his longtime pal.

Bauer's GOP stock was so high that he seemed to be rumored for top political jobs whenever openings popped up.

In 1978, with Bauer's good friend George Ryan serving as House minority leader and the governor's office in GOP hands, speculation was rampant that Bauer was in line for a top state job. But he stuck it out with Thomas J. Ryan at the Kankakee police.

Former Kankakee Mayor Russell Johnson, a Democrat who ousted Thomas J. Ryan in 1985, described Bauer as "an old-time Kankakee County deputy political person." Bauer's primary loyalty was to his childhood friends, the Ryans, Johnson said.

Bauer, who had been a sheriff's deputy for a decade before he became Kankakee chief, was exposed to how Thomas J. Ryan and other local Republicans aggressively raised campaign funds from the city employees who worked for them, Johnson alleged.

"If you were part of the (Kankakee) Republican organization and you had a job of any value, you had to move (fund-raising) tickets to your friends, to people you could help things with," Johnson alleged.

"It was just a way of life," the former mayor said. "Dean Bauer was raised in that environment."

Johnson made Bauer a central issue in his successful 1985 campaign, running ads that vowed to end "20 years of weak police leadership by appointing an aggressive, experienced law enforcement professional to the job of Kankakee police chief."

During the campaign, even Thomas J. Ryan himself suggested he might oust Bauer, whom he first appointed chief of police on Dec. 1, 1970.

"If you look at my record, when a department head has become tired or worn out, he's been replaced," Mayor Ryan told the Kankakee Daily Journal when asked about Bauer during the 1985 campaign.

Johnson alleged that politics clouded department decision-making. He also alleged that Kankakee "police weren't sure who they were supposed to pick up, whether they were supposed to let a person go or arrest him."

Thomas J. Ryan refused to answer questions about Bauer or rebut criticism of his tenure in Kankakee.

"I don't want to talk to anybody over the phone because I don't know if you're who you say you are," the former mayor said when contacted at his Arizona vacation home. "If you want to throw your golf clubs in the trunk and come out here, OK. But I don't have anything to say anyway."

When pressed to vouch for Bauer's performance either as Kankakee police chief or with the secretary of state's office, Thomas J. Ryan said, "You'll have to try somebody else."

Several of Bauer's former officers did back their chief, saying he was honest and cared about his men. They said Bauer frequently took an interest in their lives outside of the police department and did whatever was necessary to accommodate cops experiencing turmoil or tough times.

"If you had a death in the family or something like that, he was always there for his men -- always," said Lt. Chuck Nolte, a 33-year veteran of the Kankakee police who has served under five chiefs.

Nugent, Bauer's successor as Kankakee chief, says he began piecing together a pattern of questionable practices under Bauer shortly after the new administration took over in 1985.

"We found there was, over the course of the previous years, a lot of stuff that didn't necessarily give the appearance of being correct," Nugent said.

Nugent alleged at the time and in a recent interview that his department turned up evidence that taxpayers in Kankakee were apparently footing the bill for the same repairs or parts on the same squad cars over and over again.

Nugent pressed for a state investigation into what he called mysterious billings at the police department, but the Republican Kankakee County state's attorney ultimately claimed jurisdiction and chose not to press charges against anyone, Nugent said.

Nugent alleged he also found other irregularities.

"(Traffic tickets) never making it over to the courthouse was commonplace," Nugent alleged. "His secretary would give him 20 tickets written the day before, and she'd get back 15 to take back to the courthouse. She told me that," Nugent said.

"I don't imagine it was just at random. That's how he'd keep his clout. If people knew they could call the chief, and if they were connected, they'd be taken care of," Nugent alleged.

Kankakee Ald. Steven Hunter once presented a petition to his city council colleagues with 878 signatures attacking Bauer for "political cronyism and selective law enforcement."

Asked recently to describe Bauer, Hunter said: "I think you know what kind of a guy he is," declining to elaborate on his many clashes with the chief.

Hunter's petition came in the heat of what may have been Bauer's most tumultuous year as Kankakee chief. In 1975, Bauer was blasted for using on-duty officers and squad cars to run a "taxi service" that routinely shuttled local politicians to and from Chicago's O'Hare Airport for out-of-town trips.

Bauer defended the policy by telling the Kankakee Daily Journal, which first exposed the practice, that the free rides were reserved for politicians on "official city business."

Bauer also said the practice saved taxpayers money by sparing toll and parking expenses.

Mike Kinkade, who worked under Bauer for nine years and is the new police chief in Kankakee, said it wasn't uncommon for top cops in many of Illinois' smaller cities to be identified for their strong political ties.

Bauer, Kinkade said, "came from a different era. . . . There was definitely a difference between Bauer and (his successor)."

If Bauer's jobs with Kankakee, Azzarrelli and as a watchdog for George Ryan were political, his final post may have taken the patronage cake.

After George Ryan was sworn in as governor in January 1999, his office called the Illinois Department of Transportation and arranged for Bauer to get a patronage post there, transportation officials said.

The $ 71,580-per-year job as a local government liaison was approved on the same day it was requested -- Feb. 16, according to state records and officials.

Bauer worked just long enough to qualify for a state pension. Records show he was at the agency for about 178 workdays, taking approved leave on 28 of them.

When he retired in the fall, Bauer got a check -- for $ 11,312 in accrued sick time -- just as he did when he left the Kankakee Police Department almost 15 years earlier.

Gov. Ryan defended Bauer's patronage hiring, saying it was the "humane" thing to do because his old friend's cancer left him in desperate need of health care benefits.

Before Gov. Ryan put Bauer in the job, the transportation patronage post had been vacant for nine years, officials said.

The last person who held the post was the same person who approved Bauer's last government check for accrued sick time: Thomas J. Ryan, the former Kankakee mayor and big brother of George Ryan.