

Charges against Sanford funeral director not related to housing authority investigation

Housing authority director says Bernard Mitchell did not have access to agency's funds

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Money-laundering charges against funeral home director Bernard Mitchell are most likely not connected to his role as former chairman of the Sanford Housing Authority, officials with the financially troubled agency said Friday.

Mitchell was arrested Thursday amid accusations related to his work at Wilson-Eichelberger Mortuary in Sanford and as treasurer of the Florida Morticians Association. State authorities allege that while selling cemetery plots and funeral contracts, he did not deposit funds in a state escrow account as required by law and instead laundered money through the morticians association. Mitchell began working for that funeral home when he was 13 and quit last October, according to arrest documents. He is accused of stealing more than \$100,000.

Mitchell, 59, was booked into the Seminole County Jail on charges of money laundering, fraud and failing to make a required deposit on a pre-need funeral contract.

Angel Tua, executive director of Sanford Housing Authority, said the problems that prompted the arrest were unrelated to the hundreds of thousands of dollars of debt that the agency faced earlier this year.

"So far that we know, it's not intertwined with the financial woes of the agency," said Tua, who said the agency's debts have been nearly paid off.

According to Tua, the Sanford Housing Authority is under federal investigation for its own handling of funds. When closing out books from last year's budget, he said he discovered that money from an account holding tenant deposits had been co-mingled

with other funds and spent. He previously told the *Orlando Sentinel* that he wasn't sure whether that was because of criminal activity or just "incredibly sloppy" bookkeeping.

As a board member, Mitchell does not have access to bank accounts, Tua said. Authority checks must be signed by both the executive director and the chairman. Mitchell joined the board in 2005 and served as chairman from 2007 to February. Tua said that for a board member to take authority funds would require "collusion" with staff. Tua said he never signed a questionable check.

"All the checks originated based on invoices and purchase orders," Tua said.

Florida Department of Law Enforcement investigators are not looking into housing authority activities, a spokeswoman said.

Sanford Mayor Linda Kuhn, who appoints the housing authority's board, said she would seek Mitchell's resignation. "We'll be reviewing the matter and going from there," she said.

Mitchell was still being held at the jail on Friday. Bond had not been set.

Mitchell has been involved with a number of Sanford organizations: Community Improvement Association of Georgetown and the city's code enforcement board. He was an unsuccessful candidate for City Commission in 2005.