



December 12, 2016

THOMAS ERIC WATSON  
254 TWIN CREEKS DRIVE, NW  
CLEVELAND, TN 37312

**RE: FILE NUMBER: 201607279**  
**COMPLAINANT: Tennessee Motor Vehicle Commission**

Dear Mr. Watson:

Under the authority granted it under **Tenn. Code Ann. § 55-17-101** and **The Administrative Rules of the Tennessee Motor Vehicle Commission**, and in the interest of the public and its welfare, the Motor Vehicle Commission is charged by the Tennessee General Assembly with the regulation of the licensing of motor vehicle manufacturers, distributors, dealers, salespersons and their representatives doing business in the State of Tennessee in order to prevent frauds, impositions and other abuses upon its citizens.

Please find enclosed a copy of a news article alleging you have engaged in the sale of motor vehicles in the state of Tennessee without first obtaining a Motor Vehicle Dealer License. This news article has resulted in the Tennessee Motor Vehicle Commission opening the above referenced complaint naming you as a Respondent.

Please provide the Commission with a written response only as to the allegations involving the sale of motor vehicles without a Motor Vehicle Dealer License **within fourteen (14) days** from the receipt of this correspondence. You may respond via our online portal at <http://www.tn.gov/commerce/topic/reg-board-online-complaint-response-form> or by mail, email, or fax Please be advised this matter will be forwarded to the Legal Division of the Department of Commerce and Insurance for review and determination regarding further action, with or without your response.

Please refer to the referenced complaint number when contacting this office. If further information or assistance is required, please contact Amber Ryder, Complaint Program Coordinator at the number noted above or via e-mail at [Jason.gilliam@tn.gov](mailto:Jason.gilliam@tn.gov).

Regards,

Jason Gilliam, AARBIII  
Complaints Program Manager  
**TENNESSEE MOTOR VEHICLE COMMISSION**

cc: Matthew Reddish  
Assistant General Counsel  
Case/Complaint File

Enclosure(s): Complaint

# **Bradley County sheriff's used-car sales appear to exceed legal limit [photos]**

December 4th, 2016 by [Judy Walton](#) in Local Regional News Read Time: 9 mins.



**Gallery: Bradley County sheriff's car deals cross the line**

## Timeline

' October 2011: Watson, then a BCSO captain, resigns in lieu of termination after an investigation finds he improperly accounted for time away from work while serving in the state Legislature. His termination notice included a note from then-Chief Deputy Wayne Bird: "Not to be rehired — veracity/integrity."

' August 2014: Watson elected sheriff, takes office Sept. 1.

' November 2014: Watson and his wife, Tenille, spend a weekend in Washington, D.C., on a car-buying trip for BCSO. Watson later reimburses county for his wife's plane ticket.

' March 2015: The Watsons, along with corrections Sgt. Tim Robinson and his wife, spend a weekend in Hilton Head, S.C., on a car-buying trip for BCSO to Port Royal, S.C., 35 miles away.

' August 2015: Watson spends a weekend in Orlando, Fla., with top aide Richard McAllister and McAllisters' wife on a car-buying trip to Lake Mary, Fla., 20 miles away. Sources said Tenille Watson was there, though no records show any of her expenses were charged to the county.

' September 2015: Watson and McAllister fly to Las Vegas for a four-day violent crimes conference, arriving two days early and racking up nearly \$600 in extra hotel charges. Sources said the wives were along, though their airfare and meal expenses were not charged to the county. A Ford Explorer, rented for \$441, was returned with 854 new miles on the odometer, and Watson said they had done "some old- fashioned sightseeing."

' February 2016: Bradley County commissioners discover **the BCSO sold the county's \$130,000 surveillance van**, packed with electronics, to a Nashville bail bondsman for

\$20,000. They begin questioning other BCSO disposals and eventually revise the county's asset-disposal policy.

' March 2016: Watson takes his wife, a bail bondsman, to a DUI roadblock in his county vehicle. It later was found she wrote more bail bonds than all of the nine other agents who wrote bonds for people arrested that weekend. Watson claimed the couple's dinner out was interrupted by a BCSO pursuit and he had to bring her along, but radio and dispatch records later showed he was among the first at the roadblock site and she was with him from the beginning.

' April 2016: Watson responds to conflict-of-interest questions about his wife's job by saying the couple keep their finances completely separate. However, both names are on the deed of the \$460,000 house they bought in April and its \$360,000 mortgage. And a document purporting to be the registration for the Nissan Armada she drives shows the vehicle registered in his name.

' May 2016: Watson holds campaign fundraising luncheon attended by some public employees in uniform and driving official cars and where the luncheon speaker, state Homeland Security Director David Purkey, specifically praised Watson's service as an elected official. Both appear to violate Tennessee law restricting political activities by on-duty public employees.

' May 2016: American Atheists Inc. and local resident sue Watson and Bradley County, alleging he proselytized for Christianity on the official BCSO Facebook page and censored opposing comments. County settles suit for \$41,000 and changes the Facebook page.

' June 2016: A complaint Watson pulled strings to a get a woman with whom he appeared to have a personal relationship out of jail led the local district attorney to call for a special prosecutor. Jimmy Dunn, district attorney general in the 4th Judicial District, is named to lead investigation by the FBI and TBI, which is ongoing.

Sources: Bradley County records, newspaper archives, interviews.

**Document: Watson termination letter**



Watson's termination letter from the Bradley County Sheriff's Office after an investigation found he improperly accounted for time away from work while serving in the state Legislature.

**Document: Car purchases**



Bills of sale obtained from Washington, D.C. and Miami officials document a number of automobile purchases by Bradley County Sheriff Eric Watson. The Times Free Press redacted Watson's home address.

CLEVELAND, Tenn. — Bradley County Sheriff Eric Watson has been developing a second career as a used-car salesman.

From his first weeks in office, Watson has bought used police vehicles for his department on GovDeals.com, a police auction site. He has said he's proud of saving county taxpayers' money by seeking out bargains on used vehicles rather than paying full price for new ones.

In recent months, he's also been buying out-of-state cars in his own name, bringing them to Tennessee and putting them up for sale on the roadside or on eBay and Craigslist.

In August, Watson bought at least 18 cars on GovDeals.com in his own name — 11 in Miami and seven in Washington, D.C.

You might have seen some of them — a white Chevy Blazer and a white Crown Victoria parked in a field on U.S. Highway 64, red and white "For sale" signs in the windshields and a phone number to call. A dark blue Saturn and a white Impala on a gravel lot off South Ocoee Street. Or a Dodge Intrepid and an Impala on the grass outside the Benton Police Department.



As of Nov. 30, 11 of the 18 vehicles have been registered in Tennessee.

But Watson's sideline appears to violate Tennessee law. Watson doesn't have a dealer's license, which is required for anyone selling more than five cars in a year. And it doesn't appear the sheriff registered and paid sales taxes on the cars he brought to Tennessee.

Tennessee has a name for the practice of selling open-title cars on the side of the road. It's called "curbstoning." And it's illegal. State law bans the practice both to protect consumers and to make sure tax is collected on sales, according to [www.StopCurbstoning.com](http://www.StopCurbstoning.com).

Also, sources in the sheriff's office said at least one employee was paid overtime for a trip to pick up Watson's personal vehicle purchases.

When the Times Free Press asked for the employee's time sheet under the state's open records law, the document was altered before it was turned over, those sources said.

That's illegal, too.

Watson didn't return emails or texts seeking comment for this story.

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Watson served four terms as a state legislator and headed the House Judiciary Committee before relinquishing his seat to run for sheriff in 2014.

He began buying and selling cars on GovDeals for the sheriff's office almost as soon as he took office that September. Police agencies all over the country sell their used patrol cars there, along with seized or abandoned vehicles, and the sheriff's office has its own garage where they can be fixed up and put in service.

In his first year in office, Watson bought 33 vehicles, mostly on Gov Deals, for various divisions, including patrol and support services, criminal investigation and judicial services, sheriff's office records show.

At the time, Watson told the Times Free Press his goal was to "save taxpayer's [sic] money by searching high and low for bargains on used vehicles that we can put to good use protecting our county."



He bought in the name of the Bradley County Sheriff's Office on Blythe Avenue, paying by wire transfer, and either went with or sent crews to pick up the vehicles. In July and August this year, Watson sent teams to pick up four cars in Knoxville and another four in Lake Mary, Fla.

In August, he also bought 18 vehicles on GovDeals.com using his own name and his home address.

That included 11 auctioned on Aug. 19 by Miami-Dade County: two Ford Crown Victorias, two Ford Tauruses, two Dodge Stratuses, two Dodge Intrepids, two Chevrolet Impalas and a Chevy Blazer. He paid a bit over \$11,000 all told, using a credit card, according to the bills of sale from Miami-Dade County.

He bought seven more on Aug. 20 from Washington, D.C., government: A Saturn, two more Crown Vics, a Kia Sedona, a Nissan Maxima, an Oldsmobile Silhouette and a Volvo. The purchase totaled around \$4,700 and he paid by wire transfer, D.C. government records show.

Multiple sources inside the sheriff's office said Watson took Bradley County Sheriff's Office employees with him to Miami and Washington, D.C., in August to pick up those cars.

If they went on their own time and he paid their expenses out of his own pocket, that's fine. But in at least one case, sources said, a corrections officer who went to Washington with Watson on Aug. 26 was paid overtime by the county.

When the Times Free Press asked for the officer's time sheet, multiple sources in the sheriff's office said the record was altered to remove overtime pay the employee claimed. Altering an official document is a crime under Tennessee law.

The time sheet given to the Times Free Press by the sheriff's office showed the corrections employee worked seven regular 12-hour shifts in the Aug. 19-Sept. 2 pay period, with no overtime reported.

But the employee's pay stub for the period from the county finance office showed 24 hours of overtime, which came to \$521.04.

Multiple sources told the newspaper at least two corrections employees have made statements related to the incident to the Tennessee Bureau of Investigation, which has been investigating the sheriff's office since June.

TBI spokesman Josh DeVine said in an email Friday he could not confirm any employee spoke to the agency about the incident. He did say the investigation, now in its sixth month, "remains active and ongoing."

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Several cars with vehicle identification numbers matching ones Watson bought from Miami and Washington, D.C., have been seen parked in various locations with "For Sale" signs, or advertised on eBay and Craigslist. The VIN is a car's fingerprint, a unique number showing what type of vehicle it is, where it was made and more.

The Tennessee Department of Revenue said of Watson's 11 cars registered in Tennessee since September, four are in Bradley County; the others are in Polk, Hamilton, Monroe, Blount and Shelby counties. The revenue department confirmed the dates and counties of registration but said personal information on vehicle registrations, such as buyers' names, is confidential.

State law allows private individuals to sell up to five vehicles in a year — more than that requires a dealer's license. Watson doesn't have such a license, according to Tennessee Department of Commerce and Insurance records. To get one, he'd have to set up a building, put up a sign, get a \$400 state license, along with a business license, and post a \$50,000 bond, among other requirements.

He has a salesman's license issued Sept. 16, state records show. His license is associated with Best Buy Auto & Leasing on King Street in Cleveland. Under state law, that means he must work out of the dealership and sell Best Buy's cars. It doesn't mean he can sell cars he owns online or on the side of the road, said Kevin Walters, spokesman for the commerce and insurance department.

The "curbstoning" law aims to protect car buyers in some of their biggest financial transactions, according to [www.StopCurbstoning.com](http://www.StopCurbstoning.com).

The website warns car "flippers" may not offer warranties or stand behind their products. Cars bought from them may fail inspections or be denied insurance coverage. And sellers often are evading sales tax, the website says, along with licensing, permitting and insurance requirements.

Walters said the Motor Vehicle Commission investigates curbstoning complaints. He said there's no record of such complaints related to Watson or Best Buy in the last 12 months.

If a complaint were filed and substantiated, penalties could include fines and confiscation of the vehicles, according to Tennessee law.

The Department of Revenue would investigate any allegations of not paying sales tax, according to its website.

*Contact staff writer Judy Walton at [jwalton@timesfreepress.com](mailto:jwalton@timesfreepress.com) or 423-757-6416.*

## **WATSON'S CARS**

These are the cars Eric Watson bought in August from Miami and Washington, D.C. The Tennessee Department of Revenue provided information on which cars were registered in Tennessee as of Nov. 30. It's not known if any of the cars were sold outside the state.

- › 2002 Dodge Stratus, VIN 1B3EL36X42N278250. Registered 10/27/16 in Bradley County
- › 2002 Dodge Stratus, VIN 1B3EL36X12N306487. Registered 9/24/16 in Hamilton County
- › 2005 Chevrolet Impala, VIN 2G1WF55K85938758. Not registered
- › 2001 Chevy Blazer, VIN 1GNDDT13W51K248109. Registered 10/04/16 in Bradley County
- › 2005 Ford Taurus, VIN 1FAFP53U95A196710. Registered in Bradley county
- › 2005 Impala, VIN 2G1WF55E559359473. Registered in Shelby county
- › 2002 Ford Crown Victoria, VIN 2FAFP71W82X127851. Not registered
- › 2004 Dodge Intrepid, VIN 2B3HD46R04H625585. Registered 11/18/16 in Bradley County
- › 2004 Intrepid, VIN 2B3HD46R04H610410. Not registered

- › 2003 Crown Vic, VIN 2FAFP71W63X202368. Registered 10/12/16 in Polk County
- › 2001 Taurus, VIN 1FAFP52241A238100. Registered in Shelby county
- › 1999 Crown Vic, VIN 2FAFP71W3XX183218. Registered 11/14/16 in Hamilton County
- › 2003 Crown Vic, VIN 2FAFP71W93X109375. Registered 9/30/16 in Blount County
- › 2000 Saturn, VIN 1G8JU52F4YY690110. Registered 10/4/16 in Monroe County
- › 2002 Nissan Maxima, VIN JN1DA31D02T409959. Not registered
- › 2002 Volvo S60, VIN YV1RS58D322103873. Not registered
- › 2003 Kia Sedona LX, VIN KNDUP131236485671. Not registered
- › 2000 Oldsmobile Silhouette, VIN 1GHDX13EXYD318510

Source: GovDeals.com, Miami-Dade County government, D.C. municipal government, Tennessee Department of Revenue

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See Reverse for Instructions