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Flowers voluntarily cut back travel costs in final months

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After his regular 600-mile, taxpayer-funded commute was scrutinized a year ago, former Utah Public Safety Commissioner Robert Flowers didn't sell his house in Santa Clara.

Instead, he downsized his SUV to a sedan. And he started paying for some of the gas himself.

Documents obtained by *The Salt Lake Tribune* through a public records request show the state's former top cop moderated some of his driving habits after the publication of stories detailing his repeated trips to southern Utah using a state vehicle fueled with gas charged to the department.

Flowers, who is on his way to a job directing the Federal Emergency Management Agency's Denver regional office, apparently decided on his own to save taxpayers some money.

"He made a conscious decision to pay for his own fuel on personal trips - just so there would be no question, to avoid the appearance of doing anything wrong," said Capt. Doug McCleeve, DPS spokesman.

Flowers' travel in the past year still kept pace with that of previous years - in some cases exceeding it. For example, a year ago, the former Highway Patrol trooper put 35,000 miles on his state-owned vehicle and drove 34 times to and from his southern Utah home. In the following 10 months, up until the end of July, Flowers put 29,000 miles on his car and took 37 round trips to the St. George area - most of them paid for by taxpayers.

At the same time, Flowers saved taxpayers about \$1,000 in gas by filling up his car on some of those trips to Southern Utah. As a result, state fueling records show 600- and 700-mile spreads

between odometer readings and repeated fill-ups in Salt Lake City.

And he traded his Dodge Durango for a smaller, more fuel-efficient Chevrolet Impala.

During the same time period, the commissioner's airplane travel remained the same, except for two trips apparently to interviews for the FEMA job.

In all, he took four flights by commercial airline: two to attend conferences, one to the Department of Homeland Security in Washington and another to tour FEMA's Denver office. He did not fly on the Highway Patrol's plane or helicopter.

FEMA paid for the Washington trip and Flowers recently reimbursed the state for the Denver flight with expectations the federal agency would also cover that cost.

Flowers could not be reached to explain.

But Gov. Jon Huntsman Jr. apparently did not force the adjustments.

Spokeswoman Lisa Roskelley said Flowers deserves praise for his efforts. "By statute, he was allowed to use state vehicles. We didn't ask him to make any changes," Roskelley said. "He was doing a fantastic job as commissioner of public safety."

A year ago, Flowers' driving habits were the most costly to state taxpayers. When Huntsman's transition team reviewed every member of the Cabinet, they suggested Flowers should consider moving to the Wasatch Front.

But the governor never forced the issue and Flowers continued to commute back and forth between his family home in Santa Clara and a Salt Lake County rental nearer his office.

Flowers is lauded for leading security efforts during the 2002 Winter Games. But he is leaving a department that has been embarrassed recently.

Its head of DUI enforcement was arrested for drunken driving. And a trooper was charged with aggravated assault for shooting an unarmed man in the back in Emery County.

Utah Taxpayers Association Vice President Mike Jerman gives Flowers credit for changing some of his habits. "Obviously, he's made an attempt to pay for more of the costs out of his own pocket. That's certainly good for taxpayers," said Jerman.

"It goes without saying that moving up here would have been better," he added. "The state's Capitol is in Salt Lake City, not in St. George."

Flowers, who will be moving to Denver, will not get a taxpayer-funded vehicle at the federal agency.

"Apparently the feds are a little bit stricter than the state of Utah," Jerman said.