

Assistant chief accused of stealing funds

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RIO HONDO -- The Rio Hondo Volunteer Assistant Fire Chief was arrested Thursday on theft charges and may face disciplinary actions from the city. Ricardo Salinas was booked and arraigned in connection with missing money from the Rio Hondo City Hall.

Police were called after city employee Monica A. Guillen reported \$100 missing from the register on February 9. "We obtained statements, and we narrowed it down to two people we suspected," said Rio Hondo Police Chief Sam Martinez. He said both

suspects took a polygraph test and they received a confession from Salinas shortly after.

According to the arrest report, Salinas turned himself in to police Thursday morning.

The incident began when Guillen was recounting funds from the register. She told officers Salinas offered to help count the money. According to police, during that time, Guillen left to help a customer. When counting the funds later, she noticed \$100 was missing.

Salinas was arraigned for the Class B misdemeanor by Municipal

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Judge Ricardo Gomez, who set a \$1,000 personal recognizance bond.

"The case is going to be turned over to the district attorney and they're going to decide (the sentence) from there," said the police chief.

Meanwhile, the Rio Hondo city council is considering disciplinary

action against Salinas. It was an item on the agenda for the March 23rd meeting.

Rio Hondo City Administrator Joe L. Lopez said no action was taken at the time and the item was pushed back until the next city commission meeting,

scheduled for April 13.

Lopez said he could not comment on the issue. He only remarked it was a personnel matter the commission addressed in executive session.

The city administrator would not say why the item was tabled, but city commissioner Gloria Barrientos

did provide a reason.

"He (Salinas) didn't show up. We wanted to have him present," said Barrientos. "Although he is a volunteer, he is an employee of the city and the money taken from the city belongs to all of us... all taxpayers," the city commissioner commented.

City commissioner Enrique Tello said he would not comment at this time and would wait for the April commission meeting. Commissioner Rumaldo Bustamante said he was uncertain about the legalities in speaking on personnel matters and would reserve his comment on the situation. Other commissioners could not be reached. **See "Assistant," page 8**

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for comment, but a few city commission candidates did remark on Salinas' arrest.

Place 1 candidate Corina Gomez said she's not familiar with the circumstances, but if the current volunteer assistant fire chief is found guilty of the crime after a thorough investigation, he should not hold the position.

Place 5 candidate Anita Lozano said if she were part of the city commission now she would

"definitely take away his position and get him off the volunteer fire department." The candidate, whose current campaign platform includes drug testing and background checks for city employees, said "if the city had done the background checks on personnel, then the city wouldn't have this problem."

"I put partial blame on the city manager, Joe Lopez, and the fire chief, Arnulfo Huerta, only because they knew this guy had a history of

problems and they still went ahead and kept him on," said Lozano.

Salinas has previously been connected to an investigation involving missing funds. In June 2002, police said he admitted to stealing money from the East Rio Hondo Water Supply Corporation; however, the company did not press charges against Salinas.

The incident report on the theft stated C.E.O. Billie Joe Simpson gave the employees an opportunity

to return the missing money. He told police he advised employees "no charges or prosecution would be made" if the money bag and all its contents were returned the day after it went missing. Police were called after no one came forward.

Though the offense report estimated \$70,000 was taken, the police chief said the majority of the amount was checks and only a few thousand was taken.

Martinez said he believes Salinas returned the money.