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Section: COAST & STATE

PATTERSON LINKED TO FARMER IN BANK CASE

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

JACKSON Former State Auditor Steve Patterson made 73 phone calls to a Greenwood farmer who was fined in connection with the failure of a Mississippi bank in the late 1980s, according to a published report.

The Clarion-Ledger in Jackson reported Sunday that Patterson, who resigned as state auditor Nov. 1, made numerous phone calls from his state-issued cell phone to Greenville farmer **P.L. Blake**.

Blake pleaded "no contest" in 1988 to a federal charge that he conspired to bribe officials of the now-defunct Mississippi Bank to secure favorable loan terms.

The calls to Blake were discovered by the Jackson newspaper. The Clarion-Ledger obtained an open-records request to search Patterson's cellular phone records from December 1994 to Oct. 31, 1996.

Patterson told the Clarion-Ledger that he has known Blake for 25 years and there was nothing unusual about his phone calls to a good friend.

"He's been a good friend and a political supporter. We've duck hunted and fished for years and, also, I value his judgment," Patterson said.

Patterson was a banker at Mississippi Bank before his 1984-87 tenure as head of the Mississippi Democratic Party.

Patterson said the calls were made on his cell phone because of the way he did business, explaining he usually used the cell phone while traveling.

"Most of the time I used it to return calls," Patterson said. "If I was going out of town I'd grab a handful of messages and return them while traveling."

The former auditor said the calls to Blake had nothing to do with Blake's prior legal troubles. "That happened what, nine years ago? I've never had a conversation with him about anything like that."

The Clarion-Ledger reported that Blake refused to answer any questions concerning the phone calls.

Patterson resigned amid questions about the car tag controversy and his friendship with an ex-aide Danny Banks, who pleaded guilty in January on charges of embezzling thousands of dollars from the Mississippi Association of Chiefs of Police.