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State police have confirmed they are investigating allegations that Buffalo-based Trooper Titus Taggart transported prostitutes from Canada into Western New York.

Trooper here 1 of 3 eyed in probe of prostitution

Allegedly ran business of parties, 'loose girls'

By Tom Precious and Lou Michel

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Three State Thruway troopers have been suspended without pay pending the results of an internal investigation into allegations that prostitutes were transported from Canada into Western New York.

Trooper Titus Taggart, 41, of Amherst, allegedly operated a business hosting parties that included food, drinks and "loose girls," according to information obtained by The Buffalo News.

The two other troopers were suspended for allegedly engaging in misconduct, but were not involved in organizing the parties, the State Police said. Jeremy C. Smith, 34, a 10-year trooper, and Michael L. Petritz, 33, an eight-year veteran of the force, both are assigned to the Thruway detail in Henrietta.

Taggart, an 18-year veteran of the State Police, is the son of retired State Police Col. Arthur L. Taggart, who was a special assistant to former State Police Superintendent Thomas Constantine, also from the Buffalo area.

"Due to the nature of an internal investigation, details or circumstances are not released," said State Police spokesman Sgt. Kern Swoboda in Albany, who confirmed that Taggart has been suspended.

The State Police, in a rare public airing of details about an internal investigation, confirmed that the probe began four months ago.

The agency, in a three-paragraph statement, said Taggart, who serves with Troop T on the State Thruway, was suspended without pay effective Thursday.

"Trooper Taggart is alleged to have organized parties that may have involved the promotion of prostitution, while off duty," the agency said. "There has not been an arrest in this investigation, which is ongoing."

In addition to the internal probe, federal authorities reportedly were looking into the case because the allegations involved prostitutes crossing the border, according to sources familiar with the investigation.

Taggart has been the main focus of the State Police probe, which has been going on for weeks and involves other troopers, the sources told The News.

Several sources likened the allegations in this case to the Saints and Sinners scandal in which some area law enforcement officials helped organize and provide security for a 1999 party at the former Sensation'Z nightclub in Buffalo, where there were reports of prostitution, gambling and other illicit activities taking place.

On Taggart's Facebook page, he has a cartoonlike image of a scantily clad woman in a police cap and high-heeled boots holding a gun in front of a backdrop of a heart with the word "love" in tiny letters appearing hundreds of times.

At the bottom of the graphic is the word "Busted!" and yellow crime scene tape crossing over the heart.

There are dozens of photos of Taggart on his page. Some of them are with family members -- including one in his gray trooper uniform with an elderly woman -- and others with much younger females.

Taggart's base salary, according to payroll records at the State Comptroller's Office, is \$84,739, which does not include any overtime. The records show Taggart was assigned to Albany from 1998 -- which is as far back as immediately available computerized records go -- until August 2010, when he was transferred to the Buffalo area.

Taggart's payroll records also show a three-day suspension in March 2002, with no

further details about that entry. The State Police declined to comment.

Taggart's career also has some highlights.

In 2004, he responded to a call at the Williamsville toll barrier for a motorist with insufficient funds and found, after investigation, that the suspect, Bernard J. Poulin, then 16, was wanted for allegedly killing a family member in his New Hampshire hometown.

Thomas Mungeer, president of the New York State Troopers Police Benevolent Association, said he has only heard talk that this recent investigation involves some sort of prostitution ring.

"It's an off-duty concern from what I understand," Mungeer said.

In such off-duty matters, he noted, 99 percent of the time the PBA does not get involved in providing the trooper with lawyers or other assistance.

Troopers have survived through controversies in recent years, Mungeer said.

In 2011, Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo brought in a respected former New York City police official to run the agency, which had seen its share of negative headlines over the years and regular turnaround in leadership at the top of the agency.

The agency got a black eye when word surfaced in 2010 that members of then-Gov. David Paterson's security detail had contacted a woman who had accused a former top adviser to Paterson in a domestic assault case.

During Gov. Eliot Spitzer's administration, the State Police became embroiled in "troopergate," which involved troopers monitoring the state travels of former Senate Majority Leader Joseph Bruno.

"Whenever the State Police gets put in a bad light in something like this or anything else - of course we take it to heart. We all love being troopers. We want to keep the image of the State Police up," Mungeer said.

But he cautioned, "We have to wait to see wherever these allegations lead."

When asked about the investigation Thursday in Albany, Cuomo said he had no knowledge of the matter and could not comment.

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