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Sheriff to hand over documents in computer case

By Anthony Cormier

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SARASOTA COUNTY -- The Sheriff's Office was forced this morning to turn over internal documents that show who had possession of computer hardware on the day that 11,000 files were deleted from former Sheriff Bill Balkwill's laptop.

The agency wanted to keep those documents secret while detectives continued a criminal investigation into the computer tampering.

The documents, called inventory control logs, are critical to the case because they should show who had three items -- a printer, thumb drive and external disk drive -- on Feb. 4, when the files were "scrubbed" from Balkwill's computer.

A circuit judge, Charles E. Williams, ruled during an emergency hearing that the Sheriff's Office would be violating public records law by withholding the documents.

Attorneys are now making arrangements to turn over the logs sometime today. The Herald-Tribune is also expected to receive the logs this afternoon.

The laptop and computer hardware emerged as critical evidence in a lawsuit over a \$9 million jail contract. Forensics experts found that the files were deleted before the items could be examined by attorneys suing the Sheriff's Office.

When it was made public that the files were erased, Tom Knight ordered a criminal investigation to find out who handled the equipment. Attorneys, though, took issue today with the criminal inquiry being handled by the Sheriff's Office, saying that it was unusual that an agency would investigate itself and a former sheriff.