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*"A Public Office is a Public Trust"*

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## PRESS RELEASE

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TALLAHASSEE—April 30—Meeting in Tallahassee on April 25 in closed session, the Florida Commission on Ethics took action on 62 matters, Chair Luis Fusté announced today. Eleven of those matters were probable cause hearings. A finding of probable cause is not a determination that a violation has occurred. Such a determination is made only after a full evidentiary hearing on the allegations.

The Commission considered a complaint filed against **RUSSELL MEEKS, SR.**, former Council Member and Mayor of the Town of Otter Creek. No probable cause was found to believe Mr. Meeks abused his position to obtain a disproportionate benefit and misused his position when a plumbing company he managed billed the town for items

purchased from a local supply company that were used to install a filter system at the Town's water plant, where time and labor were not charged for the install.

No probable cause was found on an allegation that **JARET WILLIAMS**, Fort Meade City Commissioner, used information not available to the general public to benefit himself to purchase multiple properties with liens that would be included in a City Lien Amnesty Program.

No probable cause was found to believe that **SIMONE BABB**, a former Orange County Chief Innovation and Technology Officer, misused her position during a Request for Proposal process in order to award a bid to a particular vendor.

The Commission considered a complaint filed against Levy County Commissioner **DESIREE MILLS**. No probable cause was found to believe Ms. Mills had a prohibited business relationship when her bank bid on and purchased a county-owned building. No probable cause was found on allegations that she failed to accurately file her 2020, 2021, and 2022 Form 6 Full and Public Disclosure of Financial Interest.

The Commission held a probable cause hearing on allegations regarding Upper Captiva Fire Protection and Rescue Service District Chair **DUNCAN ROSEN**. No probable cause was found to believe Mr. Rosen violated ethics laws by doing business with his agency when a company he had an ownership interest in provided emergency barge services following hurricanes that impacted his district. Allegations that Mr. Rosen had a conflicting contractual relationship that created a continuing or frequently recurring conflict between his private interests and the performance of his public duties, that he abused his position to obtain a disproportionate benefit, and that he misused his position were all dismissed with a finding of no probable cause.

No probable cause was found on an allegation that **RONDOLL HUGGINS**, Lake Butler City Commissioner, had a voting conflict when he voted on an agenda item about a proposed rezoning of an area to permit mobile homes where his aunt owned property. An allegation that he misused his position when he reached out to City staff members for assistance with the proper procedure for rezoning was also dismissed with a finding of no probable cause.

In a related complaint, probable cause was found on an allegation that **ANNETTE REDMAN**, Lake Butler City Commissioner, had a voting conflict when she voted on the proposed rezoning of an area to permit mobile homes where her sister owned property. An allegation that she misused her position when she reached out to City staff members for assistance with the proper procedure for rezoning also resulted in a finding of probable cause.

The Commission held a probable cause hearing on allegations regarding Marco Island City Council Member **TAMARA GOEHLER**. Probable cause was found to believe Ms. Goehler abused her position to obtain a disproportionate benefit and misused her position when she attempted to influence the content of police reports about her two dogs attacking a neighbor's dog and minor daughter.

In a referral from the Office of the State Attorney, First Judicial Circuit, the Commission voted to find probable cause that New Road to Learning, Inc. Board of Directors Member **E.J. HUDSON** violated ethics laws by doing business with his agency when a construction company that he owned provided construction services for New Road Learning. An allegation that he had a conflicting contractual relationship that created a continuing or frequently recurring conflict between his private interests and

the performance of his public duties also resulted in a finding of probable cause.

However, the Commission elected to take no further action on both allegations due to the particular circumstances of the matter.

In a referral from the Florida Department of Law Enforcement, the Commission voted to find probable cause to believe Brevard County Commissioner **BRYAN LOBER** violated the constitutional amendment prohibiting abuse of office to obtain a disproportionate benefit and misused his position when he used his county-issued P-card and the County's tax-exempt certificate on purchases made in connection with his re-election campaign.

In a complaint filed against **KENNETH SMITH**, no probable cause was found regarding an allegation that he engaged in lobbying of Executive Branch agencies or officials prior to registering to lobby the Executive Branch.

The Commission granted a request by the Complainant to withdraw a complaint filed against **TIM THOMAS**, a Candidate in the Special Election for Senate, District 19.

The Commission reviewed 50 complaints for legal sufficiency. These reviews are limited to questions of jurisdiction and determinations as to whether the contents of the complaint are adequate to allege a violation of the Code of Ethics or other laws within the Commission's jurisdiction, and are based on personal knowledge or information other than hearsay, and are based on personal knowledge or information other than hearsay. As no factual investigation precedes the reviews, the Commission's conclusions do not reflect on the accuracy of the allegations made in these complaints. The Commission dismissed the following complaints for lack of legal sufficiency:

**ANTHONY HAWKEYE**, Cory Lake Isles CDD Board of Supervisors; **JOHN LAU**,

Titusville Police Chief; **KEN BURKE**, Sixth Judicial Circuit Clerk of Court; **AIMEE SPENCER**, Winter Park Historic Preservation Board Member; **JEFFREY BRIGGS**, Winter Park Planning Director Emeritus; **KELSEY WOLFE**, Winter Park Historic Preservation Board Member; **LUCY BOUDET**, Winter Park Historic Preservation Board Member; **DREW HENNER**, Winter Park Historic Preservation Board Member; **JOHN SKOLFIELD**, Winter Park Historic Preservation Board Member; **WADE MILLER**, Winter Park Historic Preservation Chair; **DANIEL LANGLEY**, Winter Park Deputy City Attorney; **SAMMY ST. JOHN**, Suwannee County Sheriff; **RICK RAMSAY**, Monroe County Sheriff; **RONALD ACOFF**, Cory Lake Isles CDD Board of Supervisors; **MEREDITH MCLEAN**, Naples Director of Domestic Animal Services; **JENNIFER TUCKER**, Astatula Town Clerk; **SANTIAGO AVILA, JR.**, Deltona Mayor; **TERRENCE ANDREWS**, Palm Beach School District Team Leader of Transportation Services; **LATOYA BUNCHE**, Palm Beach Schools General Manager of Transportation Services; **MARY FRANCES ERNST**, Eleventh Judicial Circuit Assistant State Attorney; **SARAH JAMES**, Marion County School Board Member; **DOMENIC DILULLO**, Broward County Chief Information Officer; **GEORGE TABLACK**, Broward County Chief Financial Officer; **DAVID KAHN**, Broward County Director of Human Resources; **GEORGE MIKITARIAN**, CEO of the Parrish Medical Center and an employee of the North Brevard County Hospital; **BETH NELSON**, Bay County Sheriff's Office Supervisor within the Records Department; **HEATHER HART**, Bay County Sheriff's Inspector with the Professional Standards Unit; **GEORGE JACOB THOMAS**, Fort White Mayor; **MAURICE NELSON CAMPBELL**, Fort Meade Community Redevelopment Agency Advisory Board Member; **DENISE HOUSEBERG**, Indian Rocks Beach Mayor/City

Commissioner; **ANDRESSA SANTOS MIRA**, Pasco County School District Vice Principal for Thomas Weightman Middle School; **DEBORAH ANNE HENRY**, Marco Island City Council Member; **MICHAEL J. CHITWOOD**, Volusia County Sheriff; **DARRIN PALUMBO**, Marco Island City Council Member; **BONITA K. SCHWAN**, Marco Island City Council Member; **BARBARA ARNOLD**, Fort Meade City Commissioner; **VERONICA HAIRSTON**, Fort Meade Chief Operations Officer; **AMIRA FOX**, State Attorney for the 20<sup>th</sup> Judicial Circuit; **DARRELL THOMPSON**, Long Lake Ranch Community Development District Supervisor; **DENNIS MCFATTEN**, Marion County Schools Executive Director of Safety and Security; **JAMES MARTIN**, Maplewood Elementary School Assistant Principal; **CHRISTINE CARTER**, Maplewood Elementary School Principal; **JORDAN SINGLETARY**, Maplewood Elementary School Teacher; **MATT NOBLE**, Village of Estero City Planner; **MATTHEW INGERSOLL**, Village of Estero Building Official; **ROBERT ESCHENFELDER**, Village of Estero Attorney; **STEVE SARKOZY**, Village of Estero City Manager; **JOHN BUCHHOLZ**, Wildblue Community Development District Supervisor; **RICHARD BENNINGTON**, Wildblue Community Development District Supervisor; **GREGORY TONY**, Broward County Sheriff.

### **PUBLIC SESSION**

During its public session meeting, the Commission, in accordance with the decision of the First District Court of Appeal, entered an order that reversed its previous finding against **DOUGLAS UNDERHILL**, former Escambia County Commissioner, and adopted the Recommended Order of the Administrative Law Judge finding that Mr. Underhill had accepted a prohibited donation to his personal legal defense fund from a

vendor, lobbyist, or the principal lobbyist of the County, and failed to disclose reportable gifts valued more than \$100 on a Form 9, Quarterly Gift Disclosure. The Recommended Order also found that Mr. Underhill failed to report on a Form 9, Quarterly Gift Disclosure, free personal legal services provided by a law firm. The Commission adopted the penalty recommendation in the Recommended Order of public censure and reprimand and a civil penalty of \$5,000, which will be recommended for imposition by the Governor.

During its public session meeting, the Commission took final action and adopted the Amended Joint Stipulation entered into between Boca Raton Housing Authority Commissioner **ANGELA MCDONALD** and the Commission Advocate. The Commission found Ms. McDonald failed to report receipt of gifts valued at more than \$100. A civil penalty of \$500 and public censure and reprimand will be recommended for imposition by the Governor.

The Commission also adopted a settlement agreement between the Commission Advocate and **KENNETH BRENNER**, Town of Lauderdale-By-The-Sea Commissioner. The agreement finds Mr. Brenner violated Florida's Constitution and the financial disclosure law by filing an inaccurate 2023 Form 6 disclosure. A civil penalty of \$250 will be recommended for imposition by the Governor.

The Commission adopted the Amended Joint Stipulation between the Commission Advocate and **RON MUELLER**, Winter Garden City Commissioner. The Commission voted to enter a final order finding Mr. Mueller failed to disclose donations

to the GoFundMe that exceeded \$100. A civil penalty of \$250<sup>1</sup> and public censure and reprimand will be recommended for imposition by the Governor.

A complaint filed against **JOANNE ALVAREZ**, District Legislative Aide for Senator Jason Pizzo, was dismissed for failure to constitute a legally sufficient complaint. As no factual investigation preceded the review, the Commission's conclusion does not reflect on the accuracy of the allegations made in the complaint. The complaint was considered during public session because Ms. Alvarez waived confidentiality.

The Commission adopted a formal opinion that provides guidance regarding a Miami-Dade County Commissioner serving as an uncompensated member of the board of directors of a business entity created by the County to assist in public and affordable housing matters.

The Commission denied an appeal filed by **THE POLICY STANDARD, LLC**, and affirmed the \$1,550 automatic fine assessed for the executive branch lobbying firm's late-filed 2024 fourth quarter compensation report.

Contact the Commission's office to obtain rulings on appeals of automatic fines imposed for late submission of financial disclosure reports submitted by public officers and employees. (Item X. on the April 25 meeting agenda, posted on the Commission's website.)

The Florida Commission on Ethics is an independent nine-member commission formed in 1974 to review complaints filed under the statutory Code of Ethics and to

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<sup>1</sup> A previous version contained an error regarding the violation and penalty.



answer questions from public officials about potential conflicts of interest through its issuance of advisory opinions.

If the Ethics Commission believes a violation of the law may have occurred, it may decide to hold a public hearing. If it concludes a violation has been committed, it may recommend civil penalties including removal from office or employment and fines up to \$20,000 per violation.