

Call for Establishing an Ethics Commission in Orange Beach

800 words

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People rub their eyes at the prospect, having \$87 Million on the table for one bridge and \$60 Million on the table for another, having \$4 Million on the table for a performing arts center and \$4 Million on the table for ball fields at the new school, perhaps forming our own Ethics Commission is the least bad option for local oversight, restraining ourselves from an embarrassing scandal, protecting our officials from unwise inclinations, protecting another politician from legal jeopardy.

I propose a local ethics commission composed of five volunteers, perhaps lawyers or paralegals from the community, meeting once every three months, providing ethical guidance for officials and employees about their roles interacting with vendors and bidders, accepting gifts like tuna dip at restaurants, VIP tickets for concerts or fishing trips in the Gulf, understanding how lobbying influences the psychology of the Council Chambers. This body would be responsible for opinions from the Alabama Ethics Commission before irreversible mistakes are made.

“There isn’t a place in Alabama that contributes more tourism revenue than the cities of Gulf Shores and Orange Beach,” wrote the Mayors in a letter to Lagniappe Mobile, published on 5/16. Their argument is true, bolstering my reasoning for better ethical oversight at the local level, because a lot of money is on the table.

Orange Beach took in over \$40 Million in revenue last year, according to Mayor Kennon’s State of the City slideshow, given a Lulu’s. “Check our state budgets for the revenue we contribute. Check the studies performed to assess our economic impact to the state,” both Mayors espoused in the Lagniappe.

These arguments are meant to convince Montgomery to acquiesce, funding the \$87 Million bridge west of the Foley Beach Express, but this bridge will still empty out onto two lanes on Canal Road, perhaps not alleviating traffic, raising the question of motivation for the bridge. Is the Baldwin Bridge meant to put the Foley Beach Express out of business, buying it later for pennies on the dollar?

This is an ethical question about the long-term plan, centered on why taxpayer monies should be spent for the bridge, having a local commission responsible for ethical guidance would provide scrupulous professionalism, having leadership, finance and ethics on the same page, because human nature is fickle, seeing an opportunity to peddle a little influence can be irresistible.

Financial action is usually based on factual data, but the Mayors hold, “There is no need for additional studies. We’ve listened to the travelers and our residents who must navigate our congested roads,” according to their letter in Lagniappe Mobile. This argues

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the electorate should have faith in the Mayors' gut instincts, over well documented studies and due diligence.

For me the key solution is obvious, but The Alabama Ethics Commission has not replied to my email for an opinion, outlining how a local municipality would found their own ethics commission.

"It's always amazing how some people can misinterpret the facts," wrote Mayors Kennon and Craft in a joint letter to Lagniappe Mobile, assuming this was their opening premise.

The Mayors also argue, "Those few who oppose it [the new bridge] say there haven't been enough studies and that it hasn't been proven to be in the public interest."

Yet not one single piece of factual data or traffic study was offered to the public, causing Mr. Jim Ziegler, the State's Auditor to write a letter to ALDOT's Director John Cooper, seeking clarification.

"I have more questions than I do answers about the proposed additional bridge. I hope to solve that with my specific requests for public records," Alabama State Auditor Jim Zeigler explained on Twitter.

Pillow fights on social media and in the local newspapers underline the need for supervision, ensuring an impartial referee, giving rulings on the bridge-selection process, ensuring lobbyists are coloring between the lines, keeping the ethical interests of the residents in balance with the political aspirations of our leaders.

I call for additional oversight, during a period when so much money is on the table, assuming the opposition will not replace the incumbents, lacking the scar tissue of office, simply cutting the cards before the deal is dealt may be enough to sustain an ethical balance.

ENDS.