



**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

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***Investigation sought from State Auditor after Junior College chief uses state government email to fight school funding initiative***

JACKSON, Miss. (Sept. 17, 2016) – A Mississippi junior college president's use of state email to illegally solicit campaign contributions for Lt. Gov. Tate Reeves' and House Speaker Philip Gunn's scheme to defeat Initiative 42 has prompted a request for the state auditor to investigate.

Dr. Jesse Smith, president of Jones County Junior College, dispatched Wednesday a five-paragraph email in which he told fellow community college presidents that he opposes Initiative 42, a constitutional amendment to require the Legislature to fully fund K-12 schools, which lawmakers promised to do in 1997 but have done only twice.

He continued by asking those presidents to give money to a newly formed political organization created by Reeves and Gunn to defeat the initiative. Even worse, he asked that contributions be sent to a woman who works as policy director in Reeves' state office.

The email specifically states that “the following information will be helpful for contributions”:

- Payable to: Improve Mississippi Political Initiative
- Filed with Secretary of State's Office by: BIPAC [sp]
- Created by: Lt. Gov. Reeves and Speaker Gunn
- Managed by Rebekah Staples (601) 319-8887
- Address: P.O. Box 23021, Jackson MS 39225-3201

Records at the Secretary of State's Office show Improve Mississippi Political Initiative was organized July 28, 2015, by Van White listed as contact person with an email address at BIPEC, a Mississippi lobbying organization. Records show the organization was created solely to defeat Initiative 42.

Reeves' state-funded website shows Rebekah Staples as a “public policy” adviser for Lt. Gov. Reeves.

Rana Mitchell, assistant superintendent of the Carroll County School District and a supporter of 42 For Better Schools, on Thursday filed a complaint with the State Auditor's Office, asking for an investigation. She said the actions in question are an affront to the nearly 200,000 Mississippians who signed petitions to place Initiative 42 on the Nov. 3 ballot.

“This is yet another blatant example of our elected state leaders misappropriating state resources to defeat a citizen-led initiative,” Mitchell said. “The law, it seems, applies to everyone but these officials. Last week they were whining to the auditor about school superintendents educating parents about Initiative 42. This week, the same elected officials are illegally soliciting campaign donations with state resources to defeat that ballot measure. The worst part is that we'll never know how deep this hypocrisy runs because of their refusal to release office emails.”

Reeves and Gunn previously refused public records requests seeking their own office emails. Two weeks ago, State Auditor Stacey Pickering chastized superintendents and principals for posting information about Initiative 42 and the alternative 42-A on local school district websites. He insisted

public funds should not be used to support or oppose political issues.

In his email, Smith states his opposition to Initiative 42, but reminds colleagues “we find ourselves in a tenuous position with our local school districts and our superintendents who serve on our Board of Trustees.” Smith has five K-12 superintendents on his 22-member board.

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BELOW: Text of email from Dr. Jesse Smith to all other community college presidents:

**From:** Jesse Smith [<mailto:jesse.smith@jcjc.edu>]  
**Sent:** Wednesday, September 16, 2015 9:42 AM  
**To:** Presidents MACJC <[presidents@sbcjc.cc.ms.us](mailto:presidents@sbcjc.cc.ms.us)>  
**Subject:** Improve Mississippi Political Initiative

Presidents,

I hope you are well and enjoying somewhat cooler temperatures. It is beginning to feel like Fall. When we last met, I proposed that we use our efforts to raise funds to help battle the passing of Ballot Initiative 42. If you would like to support the opposition to this initiative of which I fully plan to, the following information will be helpful for contributions:

- Payable to: Improve Mississippi Political Initiative
- Filed with Secretary of State by: BIPAC
- Created by: Lt. Gov Reeves and Speaker Gunn
- Managed by: Rebekah Staples (601) 319-8887
- Address: P.O. Box 23021, Jackson, MS 39225-3201
- Reporting Period: The 10th of Every Month Following the Month of Contribution

I hope you have had some luck in garnering support for the opposition of this initiative. I realize that there are pockets of support throughout our state and we find ourselves in a tenuous position with our local school districts and our superintendents who serve on our Board of Trustees. Nonetheless, I am wholeheartedly opposed to Initiative 42 because it very well may be the straw that could break the community college back, if it passes.

I look forward to seeing you next Tuesday at our meeting that will begin at 8:30 a.m. next Tuesday at the Capitol. Hope you have a great week.

All the Best,

Jess