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Lt. Governor and Speaker of House refuse to release emails about Initiative 42

Questions raised about state officials' involvement with lobbyists and undue pressure to influence state employees

JACKSON, Miss. (Aug. 31, 2015) – Mississippi's lieutenant governor and speaker of the House of Representative are refusing to release office emails about Initiative 42 in violation of the state's public records law.

The request for those records was sent by certified mail and received by Lt. Gov. Tate Reeves and Speaker Philip Gunn – staunch opponents of Initiative 42 – on Aug. 11, 2015.

Reeves responded by saying he had forwarded the request to the Senate Rules Committee, even though the committee has no responsibility or authority over records requests seeking information specifically from the lieutenant governor's office. Gunn opted just not to respond to the request by Monday morning, in violation of the time period set forth by Mississippi's Public Records Act.

"The politicians at the state capitol set laws for everyone to follow except themselves," said Michael Rejebian, who filed the public records request on behalf of the 42 For Better Schools Campaign. "Their refusal to release this information raises even more questions about their relationship with privately funded, special interest lobbyists who are fighting against Initiative 42."

In addition, questions persist about the use of state resources to try to defeat a campaign for a state ballot measure and elected officials' using undue pressure to influence state agencies and employees, including universities and community colleges.

Initiative 42 is the citizen-led ballot measure to require the Mississippi Legislature to abide by its 1997 law and fully fund some 150 school districts, which are home to 90 percent of the state's K-12 public school students. Voters will decide whether to adopt the amendment on Nov. 3.

"The nearly 200,000 Mississippians who signed petitions to place Initiative 42 on the ballot deserve to know what, if any, backroom deals have been struck between their elected state leaders and private individuals or groups wanting to defeat the measure," Rejebian said.

Specifically, the 42 For Better Schools Campaign asked for:

- *Copies of any and all written and/or email correspondence that includes any mention or reference to the proposed constitutional amendments known as "Initiative 42" and "Initiative 42-A" either in the subject field or body of the aforementioned correspondence for the period April 1, 2015, to present.*

- *This request included correspondence by, to or between any employees/staff members of the Office of Speaker of the House and Office of Lt. Governor and any other employee/staff member of said offices; by, to or between any employee/staff member of said offices and any employee/partner/staff member of any private business or organization; by, to or between any employee/staff member of said offices and any employee/staff member of any other agency of the state of Mississippi, members of the Mississippi Legislature and state-supported community colleges and universities; and by, to or between any employee/staff member of said offices and any private citizen.*

“I can't remember a request for a document ever - not once - being referred to a legislative committee,” said Charlie Mitchell, a long-time Mississippi journalist, capitol observer and political columnist. “There is no mention of the Legislature in the request and there's no mention of the Rules Committee in the Open Records statute having any say-so about public documents.

“With the vote looming on a much-discussed citizen initiative, one we all agree could be crucial to the future of public education, it certainly seems logical that people should have access to all documents that have been created,” Mitchell added.

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