



How City of Natchez Elected Officials Have Failed the Public: Ethics, Openness, Responsiveness, Transparency

Contact paul@oneboardnatchezadams.com with any revisions to this document.

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Confidentiality Statement: Curiously, City employees are now required to sign a Confidentiality Statement (copy on OneBoard website under “Questions for You” on the OneBoard website. While personnel and personal healthcare information and trade secrets of private individuals and companies may be confidential, a simple reading of the required statement has a very broad brush and has a chilling effect on public employees producing public information, with a mafiaesque threat to eliminate their employment.

Lack of Transparency.¹ Unfortunately, City meeting agendas are most times vague and distributed at the last minute. Votes on subjects that have not been listed on the agenda have been taken during the Aldermen Reporting portion of the meeting, rather than as noticed agenda items to be taken up. The Mayor and Aldermen have been slapped for violating the Open Meetings Law. This administration has fought public disclosure of public records, causing requestors to seek assistance from the Mississippi State Ethics Commission and transparency in government advocacy groups. Further, the City does not post its Board of Aldermen meeting minutes on the City website. Minutes have not been timely prepared, submitted for approval at the Board of Aldermen meetings, or approved timely, thus depriving the public of access to information about actions of the City. See “Decline to Search Records” herein.

Firefighter Test. Confirmed reports are that at one time, the firefighter promotional test results were thrown out over allegations that the test answers were not secure. The allegations are that a firefighter gained access to the answers, which were saved to a CD and distributed to favored applicants. A City Hall employee personally witnessed the fact that test answers were left on the City Hall copier. The firefighters who did not have access to the answers were aggravated because they had studied for the test. The firefighters who had access to the answers were also aggravated when test results were thrown out. On information, the persons involved have never suffered for their participation in the firefighter test scam.

Civil Service. The Civil Service Board is comprised of 3 board members, and on information, one is related to the Fire Chief, who is related to the Mayor. When the Fire Chief position recently came available, Civil Service did not conduct interviews. Instead, it handed the City a list of 3 names from which to select.

Decline to Search Records. The City has systematically fought responding to public records requests, resulting in Natchez requestors seeking assistance from the Mississippi State Ethics Board for City records. Even after the Ethics Board helped the public, the City continued to play “cat and mouse” with requests. The following example illustrates that either the City has no respect for the public and/or its records are

¹ State ethics commission issues final open meetings order August 19, 2018

<https://www.natchezdemocrat.com/2018/08/19/state-ethics-commission-issues-final-open-meetings-order/>



in such disarray that it cannot find important and expensive reports it has commissioned. It also illustrates that critical City staff has no institutional knowledge/interest/energy to know about City records. The City has no records management system found in a properly functioning City. Expensive studies and reports would logically be known by critical staff for reference purposes, at the very least. For example, in summer 2018, the City was considering annexation to address ongoing budgetary woes. The City even published an official agenda of the Board of Aldermen meeting, showing the subject of annexation in executive session. In response to a public records request to view annexation study reports, including the related maps and legal descriptions identifying the specific target areas for annexation, the City responded that the requestor had “not made reference to any specific document....The Public Records Act does not require the City Clerk nor (sic) any other city employee to research the records located within the City of Natchez to locate records of a general nature. You are required to set forth a specific request for specific records which the City through it’s (sic) employees can readily locate and make available for viewing....” Your City simply would not produce a single record. The requestor subsequently found annexation and planning reports on file at the public library. One must wonder if there is anyone paying attention to anything at City Hall, particularly with the purge of City employees with critical institutional knowledge.

Open Meetings. The public has generally been outraged over the lack of transparency of City

elected officials. Much can be written on this subject, but for starters, consider how the Mississippi Ethics Board found that the City violated the Open Meetings Law when it discussed garbage contracts behind closed doors.² There is also the Circus fiasco of January/February 2018 and how it was handled. In a meeting of the Board of Aldermen on January 12, 2018, the Board of Aldermen shut down the upcoming Circus performance, citing animal abuse concerns. The online Bruce Video recording is clear, and the official action was reported by the Natchez Democrat. Then, over 2 weeks later, on February 2, 2018, the Natchez Democrat reported: “Natchez Mayor Darryl Grennell said the [circus] group reached out to his office and asked if they could perform should animals not be involved. Grennell said he consulted with the aldermen and they all consented.”³ In the interim, the Board of Aldermen met in a Special Call Meeting on January 29, 2018. OneBoard reviewed the online Bruce Video recording and the Minute Book for the January 29, 2018 meeting. Nowhere did the Mayor and Board of Aldermen ever discuss or take up the matter of the circus or change the January 12, 2018 vote, yet, per the Natchez Democrat, the Mayor and aldermen had secret, private discussions and changed the course of their public vote, none of which is recorded on the minute books.

Minute Book and Minutes. Minutes are not prepared or approved timely, as required under law. Beginning in February 2018,⁴ minutes are no longer indexed, and pages are no longer numbered. This is another example of poor records keeping and records management. On

² <https://www.natchezdemocrat.com/2018/08/05/ethics-report-finds-natchez-violated-open-meetings-act/>, <https://www.clarionledger.com/story/news/local/2018/05/14/natchez-garbage-contract-stinks-ethics-complaint/606742002/>

³ Bruce Video, <http://brucetv.tv/natchez-mayor-and-board-of-aldermen-meeting-january-12-2018-2/>, City of Natchez Aldermen Meeting 1/12/18: 37:45-45:50,

<https://www.natchezdemocrat.com/2018/01/16/aldermen-shut-down-circus-due-to-animal-abuse-concerns/>; <https://www.natchezdemocrat.com/2018/01/16/aldermen-shut-down-circus-due-to-animal-abuse-concerns/>, <https://www.natchezdemocrat.com/2018/02/02/aldermen-allows-circus-in-city-today/>.

⁴OneBoard previously complained about the state of minutes from 2016 and 2017.



information, City elected and appointed officials, and staff have been informed, on multiple occasions, about the state of the minutes and corrective action has not been taken as of May 3, 2019. Filing remains haphazard, loose sheets fall from the minute books, and the lack of page numbering and indexing increases the potential for fraud.

City elected officials continue to ignore just about everyone. City elected officials have ignored citizen requests for a 10-year audit of the Convention Center, City employee requests for a change in the City's health insurance coverage (an employee benefit),⁵ citizen requests for public hearings on a number of citizen concerns including the Convention Center operations/management, constituent requests to be placed on the Board of Aldermen agendas. The smug arrogance and incompetence of the City elected officials of the City is palpable.

⁵ https://insurancenewsnet.com/oarticle/city-employees-sign-petition-for-to-change-health-insurance#.XL4pO_ZFyM8

