

Ligon, Lambright urge ethics focus for 2017

By Catherine Dominguez, cdominguez@hcnonline.com Published 9:55 pm, Wednesday, January 4, 2017



Photo: Michael Minasi, Staff

District Attorney Brett Ligon speaks during the oath swearing ceremony on Sunday, Jan. 1, 2017, at the Alan B. Sadler Commissioners Court Building.

District Attorney Brett Ligon again is urging elected officials to be mindful of ethics as the political climate remains heated in Montgomery County. Ligon used his time at the podium Sunday to address more than 15 newly and re-elected officials during the New Year's Day swearing-in ceremony at the Lone Star Convention Center. The eight-year DA entering his third term told the crowd, "Don't do anything you wouldn't want your mother to know about or anything that would make you want to take the Fifth before a grand jury."

While Ligon said his previous ethics-related remarks were directed toward Montgomery County Commissioners Court, this time it was an opportunity to speak to a large number of officials at once at the start of a new year. "I thought it was the appropriate audience and the appropriate time," he said. "... I think a lot of those words were hard-fought lessons that I have learned."

In his remarks, Ligon advised the officials to surround themselves with qualified people, not to change their spending habits as to not be tempted to exploit new opportunities for personal gain and to keep their friends, but make new friends including adopting a shelter animal. "It's not only a humane thing to do, but I promise you at the end of the day they may be the only ones who still are excited to see you and them pooping on you is usually just an accident," he quipped.

County Attorney J D Lambright, who was sworn in for his second term Sunday, agrees with Ligon and said a fundamental building block of any organization, whether it's in the private sector or in government, "is to construct it around people who have a high level of integrity and who adhere to the highest standards of conduct both in their professional as well as their personal lives."

Lambright noted he and his staff are bound by the State Bar of Texas to adhere to stringent Disciplinary Rules of Professional Conduct and The Texas Lawyer's Creed – A Mandate for Professionalism. Similarly, he said, in 1982 the State Bar of Texas adopted a Code of Ethics and Professional Responsibility applicable to paralegals. "As such, virtually all of the people on my staff are obligated at all times to maintain the highest level of professional and ethical standards," Lambright said. "Although not required by any state mandate or county policy, I expect the entirety of my staff to honor these same standards."

"When I first ran for county attorney, I pledged to do the right thing, in the right manner, and for the right reasons. I again made those same comments this past Sunday when I was sworn in to my second term. Consequently, I would wholeheartedly support any efforts by our county government to continue to enhance transparency in all of our dealings among ourselves and with our citizens, and to take appropriate measures to ensure that we maintain the highest levels of accountability."

Ligon addressed county commissioners in 2013 after a grand jury penned a scathing letter to the court urging them to adopt an ethics policy and board following a criminal investigation regarding the construction of the Joe Corley Detention Center and the Montgomery County Mental Health Facility. That investigation ended with no indictments. The grand jurors cited a lack of ethics in decision making, failure to disclose personal relationships and a "pure disregard" for best practices and above-board dealing. The grand jury recommended the county judge and Commissioners Court continuously train in ethics and best practices to ensure a repeat doesn't occur.

Much of the grand jury's concern stemmed from relationships with vendors doing business with the county, including a \$500,000 loan to one commissioner from a business contracted to do work on the facility projects involved in the investigation. Ligon told the commissioners and urged the court to stop using the DA's Office as a "threshold of what is permissible as opposed to what is advisable."

"This court has used criminal law as its threshold for its engagement in regard to its dealings with vendors in the community ... which is why y'all's conduct continues to come under review by the DA's Office because you are using me as a hard stop," Ligon told the court during the April 8, 2013, meeting.

Last April, three years after the grand jury pushed for an ethics policy, commissioners adopted an ethics code for elected officials and high-ranking employees. But the 13-point policy, taken from a boilerplate, doesn't impose any new restrictions on county leaders or establish a way to implement and enforce the ethical standards.

For Ligon, the New Year is a chance for new beginnings and an opportunity to learn from the past. "Being sworn in on New Year's Day gives you the chance to reflect on the past but gives you the opportunity of a bright as of yet unwritten future," Ligon said. "My comments were directed at all the new, incoming elected officials that hopefully can learn from others' mistakes and lead their constituents in the future ethically and legally. "I look forward to working with them all and have nothing but enthusiasm for 2017."