

Commissioners debate, agree on Ethics Committee members

By Catherine Dominguez, cdominguez@hcnonline.com Updated 11:41 pm, Tuesday, March 28, 2017



Photo: Jason Fochtman, Staff Photographer

Montgomery County Attorney J D Lambright speaks about the county's ethics policy during Commissioners Court at the Alan B. Sadler Commissioners Court Building on Tuesday, March 28, 2017 in Conroe.

During a spirited debate over nominees for Montgomery County's Ethics Committee Tuesday, County Attorney J D Lambright cautioned Commissioners Court about choosing individuals who could cast doubt over the integrity of the group due to real, potential or perceived conflicts of interest.

Commissioners considered Lambright's warning regarding former county employees, relatives and others connected to the county serving on the committee before deciding on the five-member committee, which will hear ethics complaints concerning county employees and most elected officials. In four separate votes, the court approved the five-member committee only after a handful of nominees were struck from consideration due to those possible conflicts.

In a 3-2 vote, the court selected Dorothy Woodall and Larry Foerster as the court's appointments. Precinct 3 Commissioner James Noack and Precinct 4 Commissioner Jim Clark were the no votes. Noack opposed because Foerster is a former county employee; and Clark was a nay vote because he was dissatisfied with the selection process. Woodall, nominated by County Judge Craig Doyaln, is a retired school teacher and serves as a Montgomery County Ballot Board judge.

Foerster, nominated by Precinct 1 Commissioner Mike Meador, is a local attorney who works with numerous municipalities, emergency services districts and municipal utility districts. Next, in three unanimous votes, the court appointed Kelli Cooper, Dale Inman and Matthew Koppleman as the three additional members.

Cooper was nominated by the County Purchasing Department. She is a local business professional who owns WaWa Marketing and Publishing LLC and Custom Patio Structures LLC.

Inman was nominated by the County Auditor's Office. He is the owner and primary agent of Nationwide Insurance Agency, a senior pastor at Calvary Road Baptist Church and an adjunct faculty member at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary.

Koppelman was nominated by the Human Resources Department. He works in customer service with Hemple USA.

The other nominees were Tommy Gage, Troy Stuckey, Misty Perinne, Adam Dietrich, Juanita Stanley, Geraldine Lamb, Frank Ildebrando, James Wiggins, Ronald Hale and William Dornbos.

The committee was created under the county's new ethics policy, which was adopted in January and went into effect Feb. 1. The new policy was crafted by Lambright's office. Committee members will serve two-year terms. Under the policy, Commissioners Court gets two appointments and also approves the other three nominations, with one each coming from the county auditor, purchasing director and HR director.

Precinct 2 Commissioner Charlie Riley initially motioned to appoint Gage and Foerster for the court picks. However, Lambright quickly spoke up with concerns. "I saw the list of nominees (Monday) ... and I know a fair number of the people on the list and I want to be clear that I do not have a single disparaging remark to make about anyone on that list," Lambright told commissioners. "That being said, I have some significant concerns."

Lambright said the new ethics policy is designed to "promote integrity, transparency and trust." He said the policy also "memorializes Montgomery County's commitment to high standards of honesty and the avoidance of impropriety and conflicts of interest."

Riley took exception to Lambright's comments that made reference to several nominees, including Gage, the recently retired county sheriff. "I think it is a shame when you've got two of the most respected men in Montgomery County ... and we're not going to allow them to do something this county is trying to do simply because ... Tommy Gage left here three months ago, that just doesn't make sense," Riley said.

Noack said the action had nothing to do with Gage personally but rather it could put him in a potential conflict since a large portion of the employee base reported to him. "I don't think anybody would question his integrity," Noack said. "I'm not so sure J D didn't just do that," Riley responded. Lambright said that was not the case.

Also culled from the list because they were former employees were Stanley and Lamb. Dietrich was not considered because he is a relative of Precinct 4 Constable Rowdy Hayden. Foerster is also a former employee but has not worked for the county in at least 20 years. Stucky was removed from consideration because his wife worked as Riley's campaign treasurer.

Clark didn't think Dietrich should be disqualified because he is a distant relative of Hayden's. He suggested the court put the names of Woodall, Foerster, Perinne and Dietrich in a hat and the court pick two. But the court would not entertain that action. Riley amended his motion and nominated Woodall and Foerster for the committee, then the decisive vote took place.