

Ligon, Lambright school MCRW on public integrity, county ethics policy

By Jay R. Jordan, jjordan@hcnonline.com Published 9:59 pm, Friday, May 26, 2017



Photo: Jason Fochtman, Staff Photographer

Montgomery District Attorney Brett Ligon, center, addresses members of the Montgomery County Commissioners Court. Ligon and Montgomery County Attorney J D Lambright, right, spoke at the Montgomery County Republican Women's meeting in River Plantation May 25 outlining Ligon's Public Integrity Unit and the county's recent ethics policy.

Two of Montgomery County top public attorneys gave a nuts-and-bolts lesson on how their offices curb unethical (and sometimes illegal) behavior among elected county officials last week.

Montgomery County District Attorney Brett Ligon and Montgomery County Attorney J D Lambright spoke at the Montgomery County Republican Women's meeting in River Plantation over lunch May 25, outlining Ligon's Public Integrity Unit and the county's recent ethics policy, which was approved by the Montgomery County Commissioners Court in January.

Ligon, when he took office in 2009, created the Public Integrity Unit to handle complaints and prosecution of public servants in Montgomery County – elected or not. Some of the inquiries his office receives are about elected officials. For Ligon, his policy is to educate first and prosecute second, mostly because some of the offenses he sees among smaller entities and their officials are what he calls "incidental" offenses. His office offers training on ethics and education on what's legal and what's not for some officials, he said.

"Eventually, when you come across to my shop, the only tool I have at my disposal is an indictment or charging information," Ligon said. "I never want to be that guy who sits back and surprises somebody and catches them off-guard. I want to be that guy who goes, 'I told you this was going to happen.'" Ligon did not mention any specific case or investigation his office is working on while speaking and specifically said he does not comment on any pending investigation into any public official.

However, Ligon's speech came the day after he asked Montgomery County Sheriff Rand Henderson to investigate County Judge Craig Doyal's alleged use of his county office to film a campaign promotion video. "Am I going to treat an elected official harsher? I probably am, because the harm we (as elected officials) can do is greater," Ligon said Thursday. "The trust and the resources we have available to us are much greater. And obviously the sophistication that we should utilize is much greater."

Shifting away from the criminal side, Ligon played up the county's newly created ethics policy. He has been pushing for county commissioners to create a better ethics policy for several years. "(In terms of an ethics policy), there needs to be a light on the hill that elected officials should aspire to, not things you try to avoid," Ligon said. "It's (similar) to the way you go to heaven. Some people go to the light while other stay away from the flames."

Lambright, who is often a legal reference for county officials (elected or otherwise), praised the new ethics policy, saying it was much more comprehensive and has more teeth than the previous one-page, "feel good" policy to which county officials were previously beholden.

"In large measure, it ought to just be common sense," Lambright said. "I tell people if you have to call me to see if (doing something) is OK, maybe it's not OK."