

From: Shelby County Treasurer - Erica Firnhaber

Sent: Monday, September 21, 2026 2:54 PM

To: 'Shelby County States Attorney - Ruth Woolery' <statesattorney@shelbycounty-il.gov>

Subject: Ethics complaints

Ruth,

During our conversation on Tuesday, September 15, you stated that you have been unable to get anyone on the Ethics Commission to take the lead so that the five pending ethics complaints can be heard.

I have attached the Shelby County Ethics Ordinance, including Section 5-3, which addresses the removal of a commissioner for neglect of duty. Given that the County Board Chairman is the subject of the five complaints, I am deeply concerned that the current failure to move these matters forward creates, at a minimum, the appearance that the process is being allowed to remain stalled in a manner that benefits the subject of the complaints.

The law and ordinance establish a process intended to hold government officials accountable and to build and maintain public trust. When that process is not functioning, public confidence in county government is undermined. Regardless of the reasons for the current impasse, the continued failure to act warrants immediate attention.

I was also extremely concerned by a second comment during our September 15 discussion—your question about whether it is “fair” for three people to decide to put someone in jail.

My understanding is that the Legislature established the statutory framework, including potential penalties, and required that county ordinances be at least as restrictive as the state law. The Shelby County Board established the penalties contained in the county ordinance in 2004, and those provisions have remained in effect.

The issue, therefore, should not be whether individual commissioners personally believe a particular statutory penalty is fair. The commission's responsibility is to apply the law and ordinance as enacted. Individuals who accepted nomination to the Ethics Commission presumably understood that the commission's responsibilities could include imposing the consequences established by law. Personal opinions, relationships, and political considerations should not determine whether the law is applied.

I would also emphasize that the commission itself is not independently deciding to put someone in jail or impose a particular penalty outside the authority granted to it. Rather, where the law establishes consequences for specified conduct, those consequences arise from the law and from the conduct at issue. The commission's role is to carry out the responsibilities assigned to it under the applicable law and ordinance.

Finally, Ruth, as the chief law-enforcement officer for Shelby County, you have a responsibility to enforce applicable state laws and protect the people of Shelby County.

Alleged unethical or unlawful conduct by elected officials and county employees can have real victims, and those individuals deserve equal treatment under the law.

I am therefore asking you to investigate whether members of the Ethics Commission or other responsible officials have refused or neglected to perform duties required by law or ordinance and, where the evidence establishes a violation of Illinois law, to take whatever lawful enforcement action is appropriate, including consideration of official misconduct charges where the statutory elements are met.

The Shelby County Ethics Ordinance cannot serve its intended purpose if its procedures are simply ignored or allowed to remain indefinitely stalled. Accountability must apply to everyone, including those who hold elected office or positions of public trust.

I respectfully ask that you take action to ensure that the five pending ethics complaints are handled according to the law and that any documented neglect or refusal to perform a statutory duty is addressed through the appropriate legal process.

The people of Shelby County deserve a functioning ethics process, equal application of the law, and confidence that political relationships will not determine whether the law is enforced.

Sincerely,

Erica Firnhaber

Shelby County Treasurer

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