

Honesty - Integrity - Character

Palm Beach County Commission on Ethics

Commissioners

Kristin A. Vara-Garcia, Chair
Michael S. Kridel, Vice Chair
Peter L. Cruise
Michael H. Kugler
Rodney G. Romano

Executive Director

Christie Kelley

April 4, 2024

The Honorable Ron DeSantis
Governor of Florida
The Capitol
400 S. Monroe St.
Tallahassee, FL 32399-0001

RE: Veto CS/SB 7014

Dear Governor DeSantis:

We respectfully urge you to veto CS/SB 7014, which prohibits local ethics agencies in Florida from investigating potential ethical violations involving local government officials and employees. As a result, CS/SB 7014 may then allow ethical misconduct by local government officials and employees to go undetected, ultimately harming our communities.

CS/SB 7014 will significantly impede the work of ethics agencies throughout the state by prohibiting them from investigating allegations of ethical misconduct by local government officials and employees based on anonymous or informal information or tips, including media or criminal reports, even when the allegations are supported by substantial and credible information. Current practices now require agency staff to thoroughly investigate such allegations to determine if there is sufficient credible and admissible evidence to support the filing of a complaint and decline to investigate claims determined to be unfounded.

The bill also imposes unreasonably high and burdensome requirements on citizens wishing to report unethical conduct by requiring only sworn complaints from members of the general public. This will have a chilling effect on those who want to report a potential ethics violation but are afraid of the threat of retaliation from public officials or employees. This bill may also affect the ability to file complaints on any additional violations discovered while investigating a sworn complaint. By allowing potential unethical conduct to continue unchecked, CS/SB 7014 will diminish the public's trust and support of their local government.

The Palm Beach County Commission on Ethics emerged after recommendations from a May 2009 grand jury investigating corruption in Palm Beach County. The grand jury proposed major changes to provide oversight, transparency, and accountability for county and municipal government. The voters in Palm Beach County overwhelmingly approved the local ethics referendum.

Efforts to reduce the role of the Palm Beach County Commission on Ethics are contrary to our voters' wishes. Not allowing the Commission to self-initiate complaints would be a disservice to the citizens of Palm Beach County and the state, as it would hinder the ability to continue restoring and increasing the public's trust in local government and public service. Local government officials and employees have special fiduciary obligations to their citizens, and local ethics agencies work to ensure they fulfill these special obligations.

With the community's help and support, the Palm Beach County Commission on Ethics works to safeguard these high ethical standards. However, CS/SB 7014 will severely hinder our ability to fulfill and advance our mission's core requirements and our obligation to investigate and educate those under our jurisdiction and the general public about ethical principles and practices. These efforts to block our ability to do our job will prohibit us from providing the type of oversight our citizens mandated.

You have always promoted and supported efforts to maintain tough-on-crime policies and have continually implemented measures to protect our communities and Florida's reputation as a law-and-order state. Your veto will reaffirm your commitment to continuing high ethical standards in Florida government and public service.

We respectfully request that you veto CS/SB 7014.

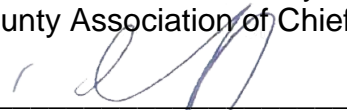
Sincerely,



Kristin A. Vara-Garcia, Chair
Appointed to the Palm Beach County
Commission on Ethics by the Palm Beach
County Association of Chiefs of Police



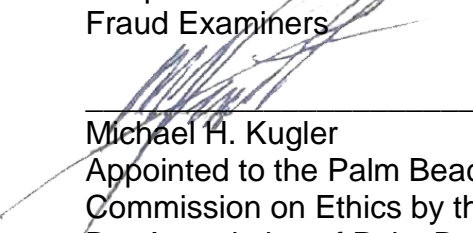
Rodney G. Romano
Appointed to the Palm Beach County
Commission on Ethics by The Palm
Beach County League of Cities, Inc.



Michael S. Kridel, Vice Chair
Appointed to the Palm Beach County
Commission on Ethics by the Palm Beach
Chapter of the Association of Certified
Fraud Examiners



Peter L. Cruise
Appointed to the Palm Beach County
Commission on Ethics by Florida Atlantic
University



Michael H. Kugler
Appointed to the Palm Beach County
Commission on Ethics by the Hispanic
Bar Association of Palm Beach County,
the F. Malcolm Cunningham, Sr. Bar
Association and the Palm Beach County
Bar Association