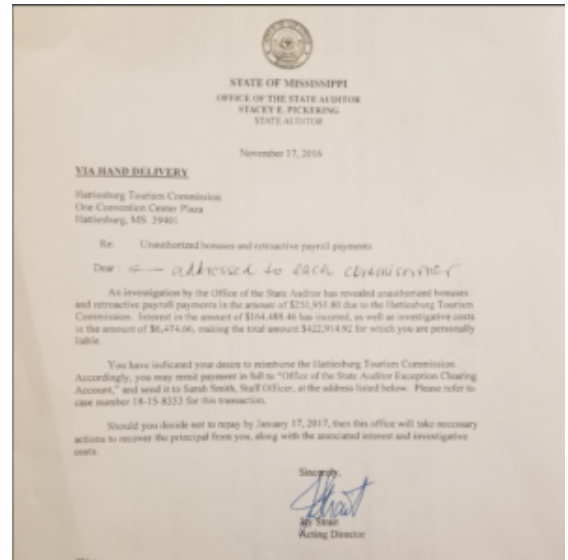


Hattiesburg Tourism Commission.

On November 17th, 2016 the Mississippi State Auditor's office demanded that seven Hattiesburg Tourism Center board members repay \$251,951.80 plus \$164,488.46 in accrued interest, and an additional \$6,474.66 in investigative costs to Hattiesburg taxpayers. The \$422,914.92. demand is connected to their unlawful votes for having approved illegal bonuses to then, Hattiesburg Tourism Director, Rick Taylor along with six others employees of the Tourism Commission.

Taylor currently serves as Director of the Hattiesburg Convention Center, but at the time, he was the Director of both the Hattiesburg Tourism Commission and the Hattiesburg Convention center commission. The Hattiesburg Tourism Commission is funded by the 2% hotel tax. The Hattiesburg Convention Center is funded with the 2% prepared food tax. The budget for the Tourism Commission is a little over \$800,000 per year, while the Convention Center Commission has a budget of over \$4 million dollars annually. Presently Hattiesburg Mayor Toby Barker and the Hattiesburg City Council are asking city residents to vote on an additional 1% restaurant tax hilke on top of the 2% that goes to Taylor's Convention Center Commission. The tax hike would require an approval of 60% plus one voters.



Click to Enlarge – Demand letter from the Mississippi State Auditor.

According to records provided by the current Hattiesburg Tourism Director, Marlo Dorsey, the illegal bonuses for Taylor and illegal pay for other employees at the Hattiesburg Tourism Commission occurred in the years 2008, 2009, 2010, 2011, 2012, and 2013. Over those six years, Taylor was paid \$217,951.80 in illegal bonuses. Other employees who were named as having received illegal compensation by the board were:

Kristie (Godwin) Fairley \$24,632.99
Traci Rouse \$ 7,789.22
Eric M. Perry \$ 168.55
Nancy L. Cleveland \$ 190.47
Rachael Bone \$ 173.52
Amy M. Williams \$ 1,234.00

Board members who voted on the illegal pay and bonuses were each assessed an equal portion of the illegal pay in the demand. Please see the chart below. The board members who voted on the illegal compensation, and the amounts they were demanded to repay taxpayers are:

HATTIESBURG TOURISM COMMISSION SUMMARY OF BOARD MEMBER SALARIES FOR FISCAL YEAR 2016												
	SEP	OCT	NOV	DEC	JAN	FEB	MAR	APR	MAY	JUN	JUL	TOTAL
Total allocated amount	250,000.00	250,000.00	250,000.00	250,000.00	250,000.00	250,000.00	250,000.00	250,000.00	250,000.00	250,000.00	250,000.00	2,750,000.00
Board Members												
Rick Marshall	47,965.44	47,965.44	47,965.44	47,965.44	47,965.44	47,965.44	47,965.44	47,965.44	47,965.44	47,965.44	47,965.44	523,619.84
Sandra Foster	7,341.44	7,341.44	7,341.44	7,341.44	7,341.44	7,341.44	7,341.44	7,341.44	7,341.44	7,341.44	7,341.44	78,135.68
Frank James	31,684.41	31,684.41	31,684.41	31,684.41	31,684.41	31,684.41	31,684.41	31,684.41	31,684.41	31,684.41	31,684.41	348,628.45
Cathy Price	47,965.44	47,965.44	47,965.44	47,965.44	47,965.44	47,965.44	47,965.44	47,965.44	47,965.44	47,965.44	47,965.44	523,619.84
James Ratliff	38,185.53	38,185.53	38,185.53	38,185.53	38,185.53	38,185.53	38,185.53	38,185.53	38,185.53	38,185.53	38,185.53	418,070.71
Chris Rowell	40,624.01	40,624.01	40,624.01	40,624.01	40,624.01	40,624.01	40,624.01	40,624.01	40,624.01	40,624.01	40,624.01	436,664.02
Bonnie Warren	38,185.53	38,185.53	38,185.53	38,185.53	38,185.53	38,185.53	38,185.53	38,185.53	38,185.53	38,185.53	38,185.53	418,070.71
Total	250,000.00	250,000.00	250,000.00	250,000.00	250,000.00	250,000.00	250,000.00	250,000.00	250,000.00	250,000.00	250,000.00	2,750,000.00
Rick Marshall	47,965.44	47,965.44	47,965.44	47,965.44	47,965.44	47,965.44	47,965.44	47,965.44	47,965.44	47,965.44	47,965.44	523,619.84
Sandra Foster	7,341.44	7,341.44	7,341.44	7,341.44	7,341.44	7,341.44	7,341.44	7,341.44	7,341.44	7,341.44	7,341.44	78,135.68
Frank James	31,684.41	31,684.41	31,684.41	31,684.41	31,684.41	31,684.41	31,684.41	31,684.41	31,684.41	31,684.41	31,684.41	348,628.45
Cathy Price	47,965.44	47,965.44	47,965.44	47,965.44	47,965.44	47,965.44	47,965.44	47,965.44	47,965.44	47,965.44	47,965.44	523,619.84
James Ratliff	38,185.53	38,185.53	38,185.53	38,185.53	38,185.53	38,185.53	38,185.53	38,185.53	38,185.53	38,185.53	38,185.53	418,070.71
Chris Rowell	40,624.01	40,624.01	40,624.01	40,624.01	40,624.01	40,624.01	40,624.01	40,624.01	40,624.01	40,624.01	40,624.01	436,664.02
Bonnie Warren	38,185.53	38,185.53	38,185.53	38,185.53	38,185.53	38,185.53	38,185.53	38,185.53	38,185.53	38,185.53	38,185.53	418,070.71

CLICK TO ENLARGE – This chart shows the board members at the top who voted on the illegal compensation and below that are recipients, beginning with Rick Taylor. This chart does not include the interest and investigative costs demanded by the Mississippi State Auditor.

- Marshall Bell \$47,965.44 Current Board Member
- Sandra Foster \$ 7,341.44 (no longer serving)
- Frank James \$31,684.41 Current Chairman
- Cathy Price \$47,965.44 (no longer serving)
- James Ratliff \$38,185.53 (no longer serving)
- Chris Rowell \$40,624.01 (no longer serving)
- Bonnie Warren \$38,185.53 Current Board Member

According to documents obtained by Hattiesburg Patriot News Media, all of the illegal votes pertaining to the unlawful compensation occurred during closed door executive session. No wrongdoing has been alleged against any of the board members. According to the November, 2016 letter, Mississippi State Auditor Acting Director Jay Straight wrote to the commission,

You have indicated your desire to reimburse the Hattiesburg Tourism Commission. Accordingly, you may remit payment in full to 'Office of the State Auditor Exception Clearing Account,' and send it to Sara Smith, Staff Officer, at the

address listed below. Please refer to case number 18-15-8353 for this transaction.

Should you decide not to repay by January 17, 2017, then this office will take necessary action to recover the principal from you, along with the associated interest and investigative costs.

After almost two years, no repayments to taxpayers have been made by any of the commissioners named in the Mississippi State Auditor demand. Three of those members: Frank James, Bonnie Warren, and Marshall Bell are still on the board. Mr. James is currently the Chairman of the Tourism Commission. Mr. Bell was Chairman when many illegal bonuses for Taylor were approved behind closed doors.

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