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STATE ETHICS COMMISSION

STATE OF SOUTH CAROLINA
STATE ETHICS COMMISSION

FOR COMMISSION USE ONLY:
CASE NUMBER
C 2020-014

COMPLAINT FORM

COMPLAINANT: State Ethics Commission
ADDRESS: 201 Executive Center Drive
Suite 150
Columbia, SC 29210
TELEPHONE NUMBER: (803) 253-4192

RESPONDENT: Paula Morris
ADDRESS: [REDACTED]
TELEPHONE NUMBER: (843) 374-5779
TITLE: Trustee – Florence County School District
Three

Section 8-13-1140, SC Code Ann., 1976, as amended, requires the filing of an updated Statement of Economic Interests for the previous calendar year annually prior to March 30. Records in the State Ethics Commission indicate that the Respondent was required to file the 2019 Statement of Economic Interests.

Section 8-13-1120, SC Code Ann., 1976, as amended, required full and complete information concerning income from both government and private sources received by the filer or a member of the filer's immediate family during the reporting period.

Respondent was reminded of the filing requirement by letters dated July 31, 2019, November 8, 2019, and January 6, 2020 as described in the attached. In addition, an email reminder was sent thirty days prior to the deadline. To date, no properly completed 2019 Statement of Economic Interests has been received. All in violation of Section 8-13-1140 and Section 8-13-1120, SC Code Ann., 1976, as amended.

All investigations, inquiries, hearings, and accompanying documents must remain confidential unless respondent waives the right to confidentiality. If there is a finding of probable cause, the following documents become public record: the complaint, the response (if any) by respondent, and the notice of hearing. If a hearing is to be held, the final order and all exhibits become public record. If no hearing is held following a finding of probable cause, the final disposition of the matter becomes public record. The willful release of confidential information is a misdemeanor, and any person releasing such confidential information, upon conviction, must be fined not more than one thousand dollars (\$1,000) or imprisoned not more than one year. Section 8-13-320(10)(g).

STATE OF SOUTH CAROLINA
COUNTY OF Richland

Personally appeared before me Meghan L. Walker who, first being duly sworn, says that she has read and knows the contents of the above complaint and that the allegations contained therein, are true and correct to the best of her own knowledge, except for those matters therein based upon information and belief, and as to those she believes them to be true.

Sworn to and subscribed before me this

19th day of March, 2020

[REDACTED]

Meghan L. Walker, Executive Director

[REDACTED]

Notary Public for South Carolina
My Commission expires March 25, 2025

SEC-7 (Revised 8/2019)

REPLY TO: 201 Executive Center Drive, Suite 150, Columbia, South Carolina 29210 (803)253-4192
FAXED COPIES WILL NOT BE ACCEPTED

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STATE OF SOUTH CAROLINA)
COUNTY OF RICHLAND)

BEFORE THE STATE ETHICS COMMISSION

IN THE MATTER OF:)

Complaint C2020-014)

Paula Morris)
Respondent.)

State Ethics Commission)
Complainant.)

NOTICE OF HEARING

The State Ethics Commission has determined that there is probable cause pursuant to Section 8-13-320(10)(i), Code of Laws, South Carolina, 1976, as amended, to support the allegations made in the above-captioned complaint. The State Ethics Commission will, therefore, convene a formal hearing into the matter, in accordance with Section 8-13-320(10)(i) & (j), Code of Laws, South Carolina, 1976, as amended, and State Ethics Commission Regulations, S.C. Code Ann. Regs. 52-707 (1997 Cum. Supp.) on Thursday, December 17th, 2020 at 9:30 a.m. at the State Ethics Commission Hearing Room located at: 201 Executive Center Drive, Suite 150, Columbia, South Carolina 29210.

The following allegations will be heard:

COUNT ONE
FAILURE TO FILE A STATEMENT OF ECONOMIC INTERESTS REPORT
SECTION 8-13-1140, S.C. CODE ANN., 1976, AS AMENDED

That Paula Morris, Florence County School District Three Trustee, did in Richland County, fail to file a 2019 Statement of Economic Interests form that was due no later than March 30, 2019, all in violation of Section 8-13-1140.

You have the right to be represented by counsel, the right to call and examine witnesses, the right to introduce exhibits, and the right to cross-examine opposing witnesses. This hearing

will be open to the public as required by Section 8-13-320(10)(j), Code of Laws, South Carolina, 1976, as amended. The procedures to be followed are set forth in the Administrative Procedures Act, Section 1-23-10, et seq., Code of Laws, South Carolina, 1976 as amended the State Ethics Act, Section 8-13-100, et seq., Code of Laws, South Carolina, 1976, as amended, and State Ethics Commission Regulations S.C. Code Ann. Regs. 52-707 (1997 Cum. Supp.).

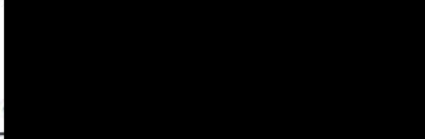
A pre-hearing conference may be scheduled prior to the hearing to allow exchange of witness lists and evidence, marking of exhibits, and disposition of motions or pleadings. In the event you fail to appear, judgment by default will be rendered against you. If there are any questions concerning the above notice or hearing times, please contact the State Ethics Commission.


Meghan L. Walker, Executive Director
State Ethics Commission

Dated this 1st day,
of October 2020.

Certificate of Service by Certified Mail

I hereby certify that a copy of this **NOTICE OF HEARING** was duly served on the RESPONDENT Paula Morris, PO Box 1552, Lake City, SC 29560 by depositing said **NOTICE OF HEARING** in the United States mail, Columbia, South Carolina on this 1st day of October 2020, by CERTIFIED MAIL, E-RETURN RECEIPT REQUESTED, appropriate postage affixed, and a return address clearly indicated on said envelope.



Richard A. Provencher, Administrative Assistant
State Ethics Commission (803) 253-4192

Columbia, South Carolina

STATE OF SOUTH CAROLINA)
COUNTY OF RICHLAND)
IN THE MATTER OF:)
COMPLAINT C2020-014)
State Ethics Commission,)
Complainant,)
Paula Morris,)
Respondent.)

BEFORE THE STATE ETHICS COMMISSION

CONSENT ORDER

This matter comes before the State Ethics Commission (Commission) by way of a Complaint filed on March 19, 2020. Pursuant to Section 8-13-320(10)(i) of the South Carolina Ethics, Government Accountability, and Campaign Reform Act (Ethics Act), the Complaint against Paula Morris (Respondent) was considered by the Commission and probable cause was found to warrant an evidentiary hearing on one (1) count of violating Section 8-13-1140 for failure to timely file a 2019 Statement of Economic Interest (2019). Prior to the call of the case, Respondent agreed to entry of the following:

STATEMENTS OF FACT

1. At all times relevant, Respondent has served on the Florence County School District Three Board of Trustees.
2. In 2019, Respondent failed to timely file a 2019 SEI on or before March 30, 2019 but filed a Campaign Disclosure Report (CDR) on March 28, 2019. Respondent was not up for re-election in 2019 and it appears Respondent mistakenly filed a CDR rather than a 2019 SEI.
3. On July 31, 2019, the Commission notified Respondent of her failure to file a 2019 SEI and assessed a \$100 late-filing penalty.¹

¹ Included in the July 31, 2019 mailing, the Commission also notified Respondent of her failure to timely file a 2016 and 2018 SEI. Specifically, Respondent filed her 2016 SEI on April 5, 2016 and

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4. In a November 6, 2019 letter, Respondent requested a payment plan for her late-filing penalties, but still did not file her 2019 SEI.
5. In a November 8, 2019 letter, the Commission agreed to a payment plan for the initial late-filing penalty, but reminded Respondent that she had still not filed a 2019 SEI and that penalties would begin to accrue if she failed to come into compliance.
6. On January 6, 2020, the Commission sent a certified letter to Respondent advising her that she still had not filed a 2019 SEI. According to the letter, Respondent was advised to file her 2019 SEI by February 3, 2020 or a complaint would be filed against her. The letter further advised that if Respondent filed her 2019 SEI by February 3, 2020, the \$100 late-filing penalty associated with the 2019 SEI would be waived.
7. Receiving no response, a complaint was filed. A Commission investigator subsequently contacted Respondent via telephone and she came into compliance by filing her 2019 SEI on April 9, 2020 having accrued the maximum late-filing penalty of \$5,000.
8. Respondent subsequently paid the initial \$100 late-filing penalty associated with the 2019 SEI.

CONCLUSIONS OF LAW

Based upon the Statements of Fact, the Commission concludes, as a matter of law:

1. At all times relevant, Respondent was a public official pursuant to Section 8-13-100(27).
Therefore, the Commission has personal and subject matter jurisdiction.
2. Section 8-13-1140 provides, in relevant part:

A person required to file a [SEI] under this chapter annually shall file . . . an updated statement for the previous calendar year, no later than noon on March thirtieth of

her 2018 SEI on April 11, 2018. Respondent was assessed a \$100 for each of these late filings. These late filings are not part of the Complaint currently before the Commission and these penalties have been paid by Respondent.

each calendar year.

3. Section 8-13-1510(A) provides, in relevant part:

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Except as otherwise specifically provided in this chapter, a person required to file a report or statement under this chapter who files a late statement or report or fails to file a required statement or report must be assessed a civil penalty as follows: (1) a fine of one hundred dollars if the statement or report is not filed within five days after the established deadline provided by law in this chapter; and (2) after notice has been given by certified or registered mail that a required statement or report has not been filed, a fine of ten dollars per calendar day for the first ten days after notice has been given, and one hundred dollars for each additional calendar day in which the required statement or report is not filed, not exceeding five thousand dollars.

4. Sections 8-13-130 and 8-13-320(10)(1)(i) allow the Commission to “levy an enforcement or administrative fee on a person who is in violation” of the Ethics Act and to require payment of a civil penalty of up to \$2,000 for each violation of the Ethics Act.

DISCUSSION

The Commission found probable cause to charge Respondent with one (1) count of violating Section 8-13-1140 for failing to timely file a 2019 SEI. Through this Consent Order, Respondent acknowledges that she did not timely file her 2019 SEI. In mitigation, Respondent asserts that she did not realize she had missed the filing deadline and filed as soon as she was contacted by a Commission investigator. Respondent does not recall being sent penalty letters related to the 2019 SEI and believed she was in compliance when she mistakenly filed a CDR on March 28, 2019.

DISPOSITION

1. The Commission hereby finds Respondent Paula Morris in violation of one (1) count of Section 8-13-1140.
2. The Commission hereby adopts the Statements of Fact, Conclusions of Law, Discussion, and

Disposition as agreed upon by the Respondent.

THEREFORE, the Commission hereby issues this written warning to Respondent, AND orders Respondent to pay the Commission, within ninety (90) days from receipt of this Order, a reduced late-filing penalty of \$100 and an administrative fee of \$200, for a total of \$300.

By executing this Consent Order, Respondent understands that she is not only admitting to a violation of the Ethics Act, but also confessing to a judgment of \$6,900 (less any money paid to the Commission) in the event she does not make full and timely payment as provided for in this Order. In that event, the Commission shall file a Judgment against Respondent in the Florence County Clerk of Court's Office. Upon said filing, the Clerk of Court shall enter this Order in the amount of \$6,900 (less any money paid to the Commission) in its Judgment Rolls, without cost to the Commission.

AND IT IS SO ORDERED THIS 17 DAY OF November 2020.

STATE ETHICS COMMISSION

CHILDS CANTEY THRASHER, CHAIR


PAULA MORRIS, RESPONDENT

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