



STATE OF NEVADA  
BEFORE THE NEVADA COMMISSION ON ETHICS

In the Matter of the Third-Party Request  
For Opinion Concerning the Conduct of  
**DR. RENE CANTU, Jr.** Former Member,  
Clark County School District Board  
of Trustees, District E, State of Nevada,  
Subject. /

Request for Opinion No. 14-11C

**STIPULATED AGREEMENT**

1. **PURPOSE:** This stipulated agreement resolves Third-Party Request for Opinion (“RFO”) No. 14-11C before the Nevada Commission on Ethics (“Commission”) concerning Dr. Rene Cantu, Jr. (“Cantu”), former Member, District E, Board of Trustees (“Board”) for the Clark County School District (“CCSD”) in Las Vegas, Nevada, and serves as the final opinion in this matter.

2. **JURISDICTION:** At all material times, Cantu was a public officer, as defined in NRS 281A.160, elected to the Clark County School District Board of Trustees. The Ethics in Government Law (“Ethics Law”) set forth in NRS Chapter 281A gives the Commission jurisdiction for 2 years over current and former elected and appointed public officers and public employees whose conduct is alleged to have violated the provisions of NRS Chapter 281A. *See* NRS 281A.180 and 281A.280. Accordingly, the Commission has jurisdiction over Cantu in this matter.

3. **PROCEDURAL HISTORY BEFORE COMMISSION:**

- a. On or about January 30, 2014, Cantu filed a Third-Party RFO (14-11C) regarding his own conduct, requesting a Commission opinion concerning whether an email

sent at his direction by his CCSD secretary to constituents within his district caused the CCSD, a governmental entity, to incur an expense in support of a ballot question (NRS 281A.520).

- b. Cantu waived his rights to a notice and an opportunity to respond to the RFO pursuant to NRS 281A.440 and NAC 281A.410.
- c. Cantu waived his right to a panel determination pursuant to NRS 281A.440, and acknowledges that credible evidence establishes just and sufficient cause to forward the allegations implicating NRS 281A.520 to the Commission for hearing and opinion.
- d. In lieu of a panel determination and hearing, Cantu now enters into this Stipulated Agreement acknowledging his duty as a public officer to commit himself to protect the public trust and conform his conduct to Chapter 281A of the Nevada Revised Statutes.

4. **STIPULATED FACTS:**

The following events are relevant to this matter:

- a. Dr. Rene Cantu, Jr., at the time relevant to this RFO, was a CCSD Trustee and a public officer as defined in NRS 281A.160.
- b. CCSD is a political subdivision as defined in NRS 281A.145.
- c. Carlos McDade, Esq. is a licensed Nevada attorney, employed as General Counsel for the Clark County School District.
- d. Loreasa Nary is employed as a CCSD Administrative Secretary II for the Board, serves as secretary to Trustee Cantu and other trustees, and is a public employee under NRS 281A.150.
- e. At a special meeting of the Board, the Board discussed the substance of a potential ballot question, and voted unanimously on Friday, June 8, 2012 to place a capital projects tax question on the Clark County ballot in the November 6, 2012 election.

- f. Nevada Revised Statutes state that a local school board of trustees “may build, purchase or rent schoolhouses and other school buildings,” (NRS 393.080(1) (a)) and that it “shall keep the public school buildings . . . in such repair as is necessary for the comfort and health of pupils and teachers.” (NRS 393.100) The Board voted to approve the formation of a ballot question which sought voter support for additional taxes or the issuance of bonds to construct and maintain adequate school facilities.
- g. Later known as “Ballot Question 2” the question proposed to permit the CCSD to levy an additional property tax rate not to exceed 21.2 cents (per \$100 of assessed valuation) to finance capital projects for schools, including constructing and equipping school improvements and replacements and acquiring school sites.
- h. Various members of the Board reached out to community supporters to increase awareness and support for Ballot Question 2, and partnered with the School Improvement Committee, a political action committee (hereafter referred to as the “PAC”), to promote its passage.
- i. Throughout the campaign, the PAC, Trustees and CCSD made careful efforts to separate activities to ensure that any persuasive materials, activities, and communications related to Ballot Question 2 were paid for by the PAC rather than the school district.
- j. CCSD offered parents and employees objective information related to the needs of the schools and the impact that the successful passage of Ballot Question 2 would have on CCSD.
- k. On October 16, 2012, four days prior to the beginning of early voting in Clark County Nevada, Cantu caused an email to be sent to his District E-Parents/Other email list of CCSD constituents within the legal boundaries of District E, which informed the constituents about how to get involved in supporting Ballot Question 2 if they chose to do so.

- l. The email in question had been prepared by Kirsten Searer (a CCSD staff member) and distributed to the Trustees for dissemination.
- m. Cantu confirmed that CCSD General Counsel Carlos McDade had approved the email's content and that he had advised that forwarding it to his constituent list was permissible.
- n. Nary, a CCSD employee assigned to support Cantu and another Board member in their Trustee duties, maintains Cantu's email list of constituents in the schools within his district, and facilitates Cantu's correspondence, in addition to providing other administrative support.
- o. Cantu asked Nary to forward the October 16 email on Ballot Question 2 email to Cantu's CCSD constituent list on his behalf.
- p. Nary forwarded the October 16 email as instructed.
- q. Nary estimates that it took her approximately 30 seconds to forward the email.
- r. The cost CCSD incurred or expended for the use of the CCSD interact email system to send the October 16 email was negligible to the point that it is virtually unmeasurable.
- s. Using Nary to send the email did not cause CCSD to pay Nary any sum in excess of her full-time pay.
- t. Cantu understood that Nary's job description included helping Cantu with communications to his email contact lists. Cantu also understood the advice of the CCSD General Counsel to be reliable that asking Nary to send the email, on Cantu's behalf, would not cause an additional expense to be incurred in violation of the Ethics Laws.

5. TERMS / CONCLUSIONS OF LAW: Based on the foregoing, Cantu and the Commission agree as follows:

- a. Each of the findings of fact enumerated in section 4 is deemed to be true and correct.

- b. Cantu is a former member of the CCSD Board of Trustees. Pursuant to NRS 281A.180 and 281A.280, the Commission has jurisdiction over the conduct of former public officers for 2 years.
- c. In his role as a Trustee, Cantu instructed his secretary Nary to send an email on Cantu's behalf to his constituent email list, providing information regarding how to support Ballot Question 2, if the reader chose to do so.
- d. Cantu relied in good faith upon his understanding of CCSD General Counsel's opinion that the conduct was permissible. Cantu was not aware that sending this CCSD email would cause the District to incur a cost. He did not consider the use of a secretary assigned to assist him to communicate the needs of school and district facilities to District E constituents to be a violation of ethics laws. However, the Commission does find the use of CCSD personnel, in this instance, to be an expense in support of a ballot question.
- e. Cantu's conduct under these circumstances constitutes a single violation of NRS 281A.520(1)(a) for causing a government entity, the CCSD, to incur an expense or make an expenditure in support of a ballot question.
- f. The Commission has determined that insufficient evidence supports a finding of a violation of NRS 281A.400(7) or 281A.400(9) which prohibit, respectively, a public officer or employee from improperly using government resources or influencing a subordinate to benefit a personal interest.
- g. Although Cantu's conduct in causing the governmental expenditure would otherwise be deemed intentional and knowing and therefore "willful", NRS 281A.170 obligates the Commission to consider whether mitigating factors set forth in NRS 281A.475 and NRS 281A.480(5)(a) and (b) support a determination that the violation was not willful and a civil penalty should not be imposed pursuant to NRS 281A.480.

- h. Based upon the consideration and application of the statutory criteria set forth in NRS 281A.475 and NRS 281A.480(5)(a) and (b), the Commission concludes that Cantu's violation in this case should not be deemed a "willful violation" pursuant to NRS 281A.170 and the imposition of a civil penalty pursuant to NRS 281A.480 is not appropriate for reasons that follow:
- (i) As stated previously, the use of a secretary to send the email resulted in the expenditure of public funds to support a ballot question, which though serious as a principle, is in this instance of such a nature, circumstance, extent or gravity as to be deemed as part of a well-intentioned, good faith effort by Trustee Cantu to fulfill his obligation and duty to further the care and education of the students of Clark County as stated in Nevada Statute that the Board of Trustees "shall keep the public school buildings . . . in such repair as is necessary for the comfort and health of pupils and teachers." (NRS 393.100).
  - (ii) Cantu has not previously been the subject of any violation of the Ethics Law.
  - (iii) Although the applicable statute does not have a *de minimis* exception, the Commission does not ignore that the presumed total additional cost to the district is nominal. While the amount does not affect the fact that the action occurred, it does indicate that this was an isolated event, consisting of one email, and not an ongoing or substantial harm to the public.
  - (iv) Cantu received no personal financial gain as a result of his conduct.
  - (v) Cantu relied in good faith upon his understanding of CCSD counsel's conclusion that sending the October 16 email would not violate NRS 281A.520, and that reliance is among the mitigating factors here. NRS 281A.520 attempts to ensure public independence from government interference or influence during an election. As such public officers have

an obligation to ensure that CCSD resources remain neutral during the course of an election so that any question placed upon the ballot will not be supported at public expense. The Commission is satisfied that Cantu did not intend for CCSD to inappropriately incur an expense in violation of NRS 281A.520.

- (vi) Cantu has been diligent to cooperate with and to participate very early in the Commission's process so very few public resources have been or will be expended.
- (vii) The Commission acknowledges the tension Cantu experienced between the Board's role as a public entity to rely on governmental staff, time and resources to help it develop and support a ballot question, as compared to the ethical limitations on their actions as Trustees to use resources or cause governmental expenditures to support the same ballot question after the Board decides to put the matter before the voters. (*See* Section 4(f)). Nevertheless, NRS 281A.520 establishes the Legislative intent and explicitly prohibits public officers from causing a government to incur an expense or make an expenditure in support of or in opposition to a ballot question.
- (viii) The Commission recognizes that the Board of Trustees unanimously approved placing Ballot Question 2 on the ballot.
- i. This agreement depends on and applies only to the specific facts, circumstances and law related to this RFO now before the Commission. Any facts or circumstances that may come to light after its entry that are in addition to or differ from those contained herein may create a different resolution of this matter.
- j. This agreement is intended to apply to and resolve all matters relating to the transmission of the specific email referenced in this RFO.

k. This agreement is intended to apply to and resolve only this specific proceeding before the Commission and is not intended to be applicable to or create any admission of liability for any other proceeding, including administrative, civil, or criminal regarding Cantu.

6. WAIVER:

a. Cantu knowingly and voluntarily waives his right to an Investigatory Panel proceeding, any related hearing before the full Commission on the allegations in this RFO (No. 14-11C), and of any and all rights he may be accorded pursuant to NRS Chapter 281A, the regulations of the Commission (NAC Chapter 281A), the Nevada Administrative Procedures Act (NRS Chapter 233B) and any other applicable provisions of law.

b. Cantu knowingly and voluntarily waives his right to any judicial review of this matter as provided in NRS 281A, NRS 233B or any other applicable provisions of law.

7. ACCEPTANCE: We, the undersigned parties, have read this agreement, understand each and every provision therein, and agree to be bound thereby. The parties orally agreed to be bound by the terms of this agreement during the regular meeting of the Commission on February 12, 2014.

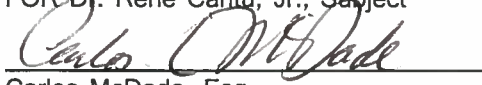
DATED this 21<sup>st</sup> day of February, 2014.

  
Dr. Rene Cantu, Jr.

The above Stipulated Agreement is approved by:

DATED this 21 day of Feb, 2014.

FOR Dr. Rene Cantu, Jr., Subject

  
Carlos McDade, Esq.  
Counsel for Subject  
General Counsel for CCSD



DATED this 25<sup>th</sup> day of February, 2014.

FOR CAREN CAFFERATA-JENKINS,  
Executive Director, Commission on Ethics

  
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Jill C. Davis, Esq.  
Associate Counsel

DATED this 25<sup>th</sup> day of February, 2014.

FOR NEVADA COMMISSION ON ETHICS

  
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Yvonne M. Nevarez-Goodson, Esq.  
Commission Counsel

The above Stipulated Agreement is accepted by the Commission.<sup>1</sup>

DATED February 12, 2014.

By: /s/ Paul Lamboley  
Paul Lamboley  
Chairman

By: /s/ Cheryl Lau  
Cheryl Lau  
Commissioner

By: /s/ Gale Gregory  
Gregory Gale  
Vice-Chairman

By: /s/ Keith Weaver  
Keith Weaver  
Commissioner

By: /s/ John Carpenter  
John Carpenter  
Commissioner

By: /s/ Magdalena Groover  
Magdalena Groover  
Commissioner

By: /s/ Jim Shaw  
Jim Shaw  
Commissioner

<sup>1</sup> Cantu waived his right to an Investigatory Panel pursuant to NRS 281A.440. Accordingly, this Stipulated Agreement was executed prior to a Panel hearing in this matter and no Commissioner was precluded from participating in this Stipulated Agreement pursuant to NRS 281A.220, however Commissioner Cory was absent from the Commission meeting on February 12, 2014 during which the Commission voted to approve the Stipulated Agreement.