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Elections Committee Defies Chair, Opens Meeting to Public as Dispute Over Sunshine Act and Access Rules Intensifies

Board of Elections' Grievance and Resolution Committee defied Chair Raymond Williams by opening its meeting to the press, citing the Sunshine Act. Members said blocking access was "mind-baffling" and reviewed grievances while pledging poll worker reforms.

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Board of Election Board member Harriet Mercer.

A dispute within the Board of Elections came into public view Thursday evening when members of its Grievance and Resolution Committee defied board chair Raymond Williams and opened their meeting to journalists and the public.

Earlier in the day, confusion swirled over whether the meeting would be accessible. Consortium reporters received an email shortly before the 5:30 p.m. start from Harriet Mercer, chair of the Grievance and Resolution Committee, containing a link to join.

“If you're confused about the on again-off again press releases you have read from yesterday to now, so are we,” Mercer wrote. Within the prior 24 hours, the public had been both invited to and then disinvited from the session. Williams maintained it would be a “working session of the GRC committee and not a BOE regular meeting,” saying Mercer was acting “contrary to the BOE's protocol.”

Committee members disagreed. Barbara LaRonde argued that “our Sunshine Act requires all government meetings except for executive sessions to be made accessible to the public and the media.” She described the chair’s reasoning for exclusion as “mind-baffling,” adding, “there are no secrets” in their discussions. LaRonde claimed that all three committee meetings to date had been disrupted by the chair’s attempts to block public access, forcing members to move to platforms outside of BOE control to keep proceedings open.

Mercer echoed that view, stressing that the fact committee meetings were historically shielded from scrutiny did not justify continuing the practice. Requests for the Board’s bylaws or any formal rules governing public access were not answered by Williams, nor did he respond to Mercer’s inquiry for clarity.

After more than an hour debating public access, the committee turned to its agenda. Members reviewed their process for handling complaints and began considering the first five on their list. They pledged reforms that included recruiting and training new poll workers.

One grievance involved Elections Supervisor Caroline Fawkes, who had been required to apologize to poll worker Anne Williams. The committee found the apology unsatisfactory, calling for “more sound responses” from Fawkes.

With time running short, members agreed to continue reviewing additional complaints at their next meeting.