Florida Ethics and Integrity – Not What It Should Be!

It seems our elected officials and those in position of authority have Florida sand in their eyes, the wind in their ears and even though we are in the land of sunshine, Florida has some very large and deep cloud cover.

Yearly there is a State by State integrity investigation and a report is released. The most recent report was released November 9, 2015 and large number of the population of the state of Florida were not surprised we were given a “D-“. I wonder if Gov. Scott and Senator Gaetz are proud of this or do they have some hidden excuse.

The purpose of these reports is to inform the citizenry by assessing the systems in place in order to deter corruption within state governments. This pretty well states it all:

* Public Access to Information F
* Political Financing F
* Electoral Oversight F
* Executive Accountability D+
* Legislative Accountability D+
* State Budget Processes F
* State Civil Service Management F
* Procurement Service Management F
* Internal Auditing Management F
* Judicial Accountability D+
* Ethics Enforcement Agencies D-
* Lobbying Disclosures D-

It is without a doubt that Florida’s politics and government have a very well-earned reputation for unethical behavior and corruption. If only the walls of the state offices had ears.

Have you seen the reports about Gov. Rick Scott and other elected leaders taking secret, swank hunting trips with sugar-industry lobbyists to the King Ranch in Texas? Despite a gift ban, Big Sugar managed to pay much of the cost by routing the money through the Republican Party of Florida.

We all know about the ethical problems within the RPOF and those of current and previous legislators. Rubio still claims he did nothing wrong but pull out the wrong credit card. Doesn’t this supposedly smart man know which credit card uses which pin number?

In an interview at the state Capitol last month by Matt Reed, a Public Interest columnist, the FL. House Rules and Ethics Chairman Ritch Workman told him the vast majority of lawmakers and staff work hard and try to do right by constituents. But he also acknowledged the influence of ego and money in politics and the always-looming threat of corruption.

Workman has been encouraged to sponsor an anti-corruption bill urged by Gannett news sites and endorsed by all 20 state attorneys.

The 2016 legislative session begins January 12th and Integrity Florida is pleased that two legislators have announced they will file an anti-corruption bill in both the Senate and the House. The bill was proposed by Gannett News Service and is consistent with Integrity Florida’s research and public policy recommendations. Senator Don Gaetz (R-Destin) and Representative Ritch Workman (R-Melbourne) have pledged to file the legislation. You can read their announcement here.

The bill would put into law two anti-corruption recommendations that were in the 2010 Nineteenth Statewide Grand Jury Report titled A Study of Public Corruption in Florida and Recommended Solutions. The bill would expand the definition of “public servants” so government vendors and contractors could be prosecuted under bribery and misuse-of-office statutes.

It also removes language in the statutes that requires prosecutors prove defendants acted “corruptly” or with “corrupt intent.” The grand jury described that language as an extra burden of proof that has limited the effectiveness of corruption laws. Instead prosecutors would only have to meet the standard burden that someone acted “intentionally or knowingly.”

The Nineteenth Statewide Grand Jury report contained additional recommendations to fight corruption in Florida, many of which have never been considered by the legislature. It’s encouraging to see this new legislation and Integrity Florida hopes more legislators will revisit the Grand Jury’s recommendations and use them as a template for future reforms.

In 2011, a study by Integrity Florida found that government of all kinds in the Sunshine State ranked No. 1 for public corruption based on federal convictions.

In 2014, Florida state government ranked No. 1 for political corruption based on a Harvard University survey of statehouse correspondents across the country.

And last but not least, let’s not forget all the e-mails released between Jeb Bush’s Foundation for Excellence in Education (FEE) and the Florida Department of Education regarding legislation, Common Core and trips for Bush’s summits.