



Wisconsin Ethics Commission

Campaign Finance | Lobbying | Ethics
212 East Washington Avenue | Third Floor | P.O. Box 7125 | Madison, WI 53707-7125
(608) 266-8123 | ethics@wi.gov | <https://ethics.wi.gov>

DATE: January 17, 2018

TO: Members, Wisconsin State Senate

CC: The Honorable Robin Vos, Assembly Speaker
The Honorable Gordon Hintz, Assembly Minority Leader

FROM: David Halbrooks, Commission Chair

SUBJECT: Regarding Confirmation of Brian Bell as Ethics Commission Administrator

In July 2016, the Wisconsin Ethics Commission came into existence. Our first task was to pick an administrator. There was no heir apparent and no one from the staff applied for the promotion. While the prospect was initially scary, we soon realized that we had an incredible opportunity. As we worked through the applications, anyone with any partisan background (let alone anyone who had run for partisan office) was rejected in the first round. We believed that we had a solemn duty to cast off the vestiges of the GAB. We were committed to eliminating the errors that occurred in the creation and administration of the GAB. Our duty was to make sure that what happened under the GAB would never happen again.

We chose Brian Bell as our Administrator. We chose him because he told us that he had been raised for a life in public service. We chose him because of the rave reviews we received from his military supervisors. We chose Brian because he committed to work every day to lead us in a fair, non-partisan, and decent manner.

In every meeting we have held and in every correspondence since we hired Brian Bell, we have been amazed at how lucky we are to have him in our service. If you have any questions, please watch the videos of our meetings. You will see a professional and well-prepared administrator. His staff is ready with answers to each of our questions. We ask that you take the time to read the attached documents. We believe that if you take a close look at Brian Bell that you too will agree that we have chosen well.

Wisconsin Ethics Commissioners

Mac Davis | David R. Halbrooks | Katie McCallum | Pat Strachota | Timothy Van Akkeren | Jeralyn Wendelberger

Administrator
Brian M. Bell, MPA



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DATE: January 16, 2018

TO: Members, Wisconsin State Senate

FROM: Brian M. Bell, MPA
Ethics Commission Administrator

SUBJECT: Appointment as Administrator on the Wisconsin Ethics Commission

My name is Brian Bell, and I am honored that the Wisconsin Ethics Commission unanimously selected me to serve as the agency's first Administrator on July 11, 2016. I have now humbly served the agency and the people of the State of Wisconsin for over 18 months in this capacity, which means that unlike most appointed officials, consideration of my appointment can include substantial actions in the very position, as well as a clear record of what I have accomplished in this role with the support of the Commission and its staff.

I would like to start by helping you to better understand more completely who I am, not only as a public servant, but also as a person. I grew up in Sun Prairie, Wisconsin, which at that time was still somewhat of a small town. My father has worked in a few different aspects of the business side of an insurance company and my mother has mostly worked caring for others – either running an in-home daycare or at assisted living facilities. Perhaps that explains my interest in effective management and service to others.

My grandparents were also influential in shaping who I am as a person, particularly my paternal grandmother, Charlotte Bell. She instilled in me the values of continual learning and improvement and community service. She inspired me to pursue a career in public service in order to have the greatest possible positive impact on the largest number of people, and to make my life's passion to do something that worked to improve the lives of others.

Those values are also a substantial reason why I decided to enlist in the Army Reserve at age 17. It took me about six months to convince my parents to sign the paperwork and to go through the military's bureaucratic hurdles, but I finally enlisted as a Combat Engineer on February 26, 2000. I was a couple weeks from graduating Advanced Individual Training at Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri when the attacks occurred on September 11, 2001. In early 2003, I was mobilized with the initial plan of being part of the invasion of Iraq going through Turkey, who ultimately did not allow US troops to enter. The Army then decided that by the time they could reroute my unit through Kuwait, the Iraq War would likely be over, so instead I spent about a year at Fort Hood, Texas supporting deployment operations at the airfield.

In 2006 I learned that an Army unit was being organized to deploy to Iraq and was looking for volunteers to serve in leadership positions. By this time, I had been promoted five times, and typically ahead of my peers – from Private up to Staff Sergeant. I put my education on hold and voluntarily deployed as a Combat Engineer Squad Leader, conduct route clearance missions

throughout Al Anbar Province, Iraq. Our mission was to drive down major roads ahead of anyone else to find and eliminate roadside bombs so that military and civilians could travel safely. During that deployment, my vehicle had an improvised explosive device detonated on it on three separate occasions, and the attack on January 30, 2007 fatally wounded a member of my squad who was in my vehicle. Stephen Daniel Shannon died the following day from his wounds; he was only 21 years old.

When I returned from Iraq, I completed my undergraduate degree in political science at the UW-Whitewater and then continued my education at UW-Madison pursuing a Masters Degree in Public Affairs, focusing on public management and public policy analysis. In 2010 I was again presented with an opportunity to serve when another Army unit was preparing to deploy to Afghanistan this time, but doing the same route clearance mission and again in need of people to serve in leadership. Months earlier I received a rare direct commission as an Engineer Officer, and I worked to complete my graduate education early and complete the Engineer Officer Basic Course to be able to lead a platoon conducting route clearance missions throughout south and southwest Afghanistan.

I was able to apply the lessons I had learned in Iraq to provide leadership to a platoon of about 30 Soldiers during our deployment to Afghanistan. We conducted over 270 route clearance combat missions with an 80 percent find and clear rate of explosive hazards (meaning when we found them before they found us); the Army Standard is around 50 percent. Most important to me was that I was able to bring all of the Soldiers in my platoon home safely to their loved ones.

After my deployment to Afghanistan, I served as a Battalion Intelligence Officer for about two years, until I was asked by my Battalion Commander to take command of a Sapper Company, over all of the other officers that would possibly be interested in taking the command. Typically, Officers compete for Command opportunities – especially for rare and elite units like Sapper Companies, a rare combat unit in the Army Reserve. However, the unit would be returning from a deployment to Afghanistan and had a history of leadership and management issues and would be losing most of its assigned Soldiers due to transfers or transition out of the military upon returning from deployment. When I took command, the unit was “red” on virtually all performance metrics and had less than 50 percent of authorized positions filled. When I left command of the company, virtually all performance metrics were “green” or steadily improving and had over 125 assigned Soldiers – about 120 percent of authorized personnel strength. I relinquished company command after nearly three years in August of 2016 so that I could spend time with my wife and son, and to focus on my newly appointed role as the Ethics Commission’s Administrator.

Regardless of what your perspective might be about the GAB or the other previous boards, my focus has been, is, and will continue to be on addressing those things within my sphere of influence to continually improve the Ethics Commission so that it can be as fair, objective, transparent, efficient and effective as it can possibly be. And I look forward to continuing to work proactively with each of you to do precisely that, as I have told each Legislator during individual introductory meetings. I believe that the current structure of the agency, the people serving as Commissioners, and the choice the agency has made regarding how it operates represent a substantial improvement. These factors also help to prevent occurrences that previous boards have been criticized about from ever happening.

I am also including with this memo several documents that will hopefully provide you with greater insights rather than repeating that information here, including the following:

- the resume I used when applying for the Administrator position;
- the memo that was the basis for the performance evaluation I received from the Ethics Commission at its December 5, 2017 meeting, with relevant updated information;
- and a memo providing further detail as to why I left working for the Government Accountability Board (GAB), and why I wanted to return to work for the Ethics Commission.

Thank you for your consideration of my appointment as the Administrator for the Ethics Commission. I am grateful for the opportunity to serve the people of Wisconsin in this capacity. I stand ready to answer any questions you may have about the information I have presented or anything else about that might help you consider my appointment. Please feel free to reach me directly at BrianM.Bell@wi.gov or (608) 267-0715. Again, thank you for your time and consideration.

PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE

Wisconsin Department of Safety and Professional Services

2015 - Present

Budget and Policy Analyst - Agency

- Coordinate all procurement / purchasing activities for the Department as the Purchasing Officer
- Develop and monitor the Department’s operating and appropriation budgets and provide periodic reports and analysis to management utilizing PeopleSoft ERP (STAR)
- Serve as the Department’s Procurement Card Administrator, WISBUY P-Card Marketplace Administrator, Printing Officer, and STAR Finance/Procurement Change Agent
- Advise management on budgets, grants, contracts, and MOUs and develop effective courses of action
- Agency lead on six contracts through RFB, RFP, or RFI valued at over \$9.8 million and managed all contracts for the department valued at about \$18.5 million

Wisconsin Government Accountability Board – Madison, WI

2012 –2015

Elections and Ethics Specialist

- Guided the development of the Agency’s first comprehensive legislative agenda, advocating for 72 legislative proposals related to campaign finance, lobbying, ethics for state public officials, and elections
- Monitored and analyze all State and Federal legislation and served as a legislative liaison for the agency
- Modernized the agency’s complaint and investigations tracking by creating an online, secure, searchable database from a system that was entirely dependent on paper based systems
- Developed statements of work to modernize the agency’s legislative liaison and statements of economic interests reporting systems, leveraging available technology
- Assisted the State Legislature, media, and the public with available agency data and statistical analysis
- Conducted statistical and policy analyses related to lobbying, campaign finance, ethics and elections
- Provided decision-makers with information on alternative courses of action needed to formulate policy
- Collaborated on drafting fiscal estimates and testimony on legislation for committee hearings
- Offered guidance, interpretation, and application of State Statutes and Administrative Rules GAB governs
- Served as an instructor for numerous training events on the State of Wisconsin’s code of ethics, lobbying laws, and campaign finance laws, and helped to create online training webinars and materials
- Administered Wisconsin’s laws related to lobbying, agency legislative liaisons, campaign finance, and ethics

Elections Data Manager

- Developed BADGER Voters – an online data request service utilizing Microsoft SharePoint and SQL databases, reducing request response times from approximately five business days to 15 minutes, and saving more than \$125,000 annually, and the project was completed ahead of schedule and under budget
- Created and managed the first mandatory statewide election cost data reporting system in the nation
- Collected, synthesized, analyzed, and disseminated election data from 1,924 jurisdictions for legislative requests , programs, projects, federal reporting requirements, and audits
- Program co-lead for the development and implementation of a \$1.9 million federal grant to provide online resources for military and overseas voters, including online ballot delivery
- Collaborated with program and IT staff to develop a statement of work for modernization of one of the agency’s data collection systems

EDUCATION

University of Wisconsin – Madison

Master’s in Public Affairs

2008 - 2010

- Public Management, Policy Analysis, and National Security Policy emphasis
- Capstone: *Assessing Investment Advice Provided to Participants in Defined Contribution Plans* (Bell, Denney, Quinn, Shields, Weisman) <http://www.lafollette.wisc.edu/images/publications/workshops/2010-retirement.pdf>.

University of Wisconsin – Whitewater

Bachelor of Arts – Political Science

2002 – 2008

- 2004 – 2005 Midwest Campus Compact Student Civic Leadership Fellow
- 2002 – 2003 Student Government Legislative Affairs Director

MILITARY EXPERIENCE

402nd Sapper Company, 389th Engineer Battalion, US Army Reserve

January 2014 - Present

Captain (O-3E) – Company Commander

- Command a company of approximately 130 Soldiers, directing all organization personnel, medical, training, operations, maintenance, and logistics efforts
- Responsible for \$2.3 million of military equipment, vehicles, and weapons systems
- Define goals, develop and prioritize objectives, conduct program evaluation and lead strategic planning efforts for an organization of more than 120 individuals

389th Engineer Battalion, US Army Reserve

2012 – 2014

1st Lieutenant (O-2E) – Battalion Intelligence Officer

- Trained all Company Intelligence Support Teams (CoISTs) in the Battalion without external contractor support
- Monitored and analyzed domestic and international threats for all battalion activities and personnel
- Developed the standard operating procedures for the Battalion Intelligence Section and subordinate units

1st Assault Platoon, 469th Mobility Augmentation Company

2009 – 2012

1st Lieutenant (O-2E) – Platoon Leader

- Managed a combat engineer unit of 30 personnel and approximately \$26 million of equipment
- Directly planned and coordinated 270 route clearance combat missions throughout Afghanistan, resulting in an 80 percent find and clear rate of explosive hazards; the Army Standard was 50 percent
- Conducted daily full-spectrum intelligence analysis to influence tactical and operational planning
- Partnered with an Afghan Language Assistant, Afghan National Security Forces, and a International Security Assistance Forces including Canadian, British, Albanian, and Estonian Soldiers
- Directed a new strategic plan for a unit of 140 personnel in order to prepare for deployment

Enlisted Combat Engineer, 469th Mobility Augmentation Company

2000 – 2009

Staff Sergeant (E-6), Combat Engineer Squad Leader

- Supervised a combat engineer squad as part of a platoon conducting route reconnaissance and clearance operations to eliminate explosive hazards and ensure freedom of movement during Operation Iraqi Freedom
- Managed the operation and maintenance of more than \$1.5 million of equipment and personnel while deployed throughout Al Anbar Province, Iraq

Military Education

- Company Commander and First Sergeant Course (Pre-Command) Course - Fort Knox, KY - 2014
- Engineer Basic Officer Leaders Course (EBOLC) – Fort Leonard Wood, MO – 2010
- Route Reconnaissance and Clearance Course (R2C2) for Leaders – Fort Leonard Wood, MO – 2010
- Basic Non-Commissioned Officer Course (BNCOC) Phase One – Fort McCoy, WI – 2006
- Route Reconnaissance and Clearance Course (R2C2) for Operators – Fort Leonard Wood, MO – 2006
- Primary Leadership Development Course (PLDC) – Fort Lewis, WA – 2005
- Combat Engineer Advanced Individual Training (AIT) – Fort Leonard Wood, MO – 2001
- Basic Combat Training (BCT) – Fort Leonard Wood, MO – 2000

Military Awards and Decorations

- Bronze Star Medal, Purple Heart Medal, Army Commendation Medal with bronze oak leaf cluster, Army Achievement Medal, Army Good Conduct Medal, Army Reserve Component Achievement Medal with three bronze oak leaf clusters, National Defense Medal, Afghanistan Campaign Medal with one bronze campaign star, Iraq Campaign Medal with two bronze campaign stars, Global War On Terrorism Service Medal, Armed Forces Reserve Medal with Mobilization “M” device, bronze hour glass device, and roman numeral “3”, Non-Commissioned Officer Professional Development Ribbon, Army Service Ribbon, Overseas Service Ribbon with roman numeral “2”, North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) International Security Force (ISAF) ribbon, and Combat Action Badge



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DATE: January 16, 2018

TO: David Halbrooks, Commission Chair
Katie McCallum, Commission Vice-Chair

FROM: Brian M. Bell, MPA
Commission Administrator

SUBJECT: Why I left the GAB and Then Returned to the Ethics Commission

At the Ethics Commission's January 11, 2018 meeting I was asked why I resigned from the Government Accountability Board (GAB), and based on that experience, why I was interested in returning in a greater capacity as the Administrator for the Ethics Commission. You have asked me to elaborate.

I left to pursue further career development, but also I did not always agree with how the GAB operated. I left the GAB because I thought I was approaching the limits of what I could positively influence, and wanted to look elsewhere for an opportunity to serve this state. I returned to the Ethics Commission because I believed that there was a sufficient foundation to build from and address the shortcomings I witnessed under the old agency.

In retrospect, there were very apparent ways the GAB could have managed its operations differently and more in line with public management best practices. Some of the challenges the agency faced were consequences of how the agency chose to operate. For example, high staff turnover, staffing shortages, and labor-intensive activities. Eventually I reached a point where the negatives outweighed the positives.

I had begun working at the GAB in March of 2012 as the Elections Data Manager. In late 2013, a position in the Ethics and Accountability Division became open. I was offered and accepted the position. I found the subject matter to be more complex, challenging, and rewarding. Also, the change gave me the opportunity to work under a different supervisor who was more open to innovation. I was frustrated by the lack of a clearly identified strategic vision and a resistance to new ways of operating within the Elections Division. Had that opportunity not been available, I would have looked for a different job outside of the GAB.

In the Ethics and Accountability Division my duties included primarily supporting the lobbying program, focusing on analyzing and reporting data and improving the Eye on Lobbying website. I also occasionally assisted with campaign finance reporting and statements of economic interests. I was involved in some auditing of reports. I was not involved in any investigation conducted by the GAB.

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Administrator

Brian M. Bell, MPA

Why I Left the GAB and Returned to the Ethics Commission

Brian M. Bell, MPA

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During this time, I acquired a substantially greater understanding of how the GAB operated. Having worked in both divisions of the agency, I developed a comprehensive understanding of the management craft of supervisors, the culture of the organization, and the day-to-day operations of the agency.

The Government Accountability Board addressed election-related matters first, often leaving insufficient time to thoroughly address campaign finance, lobbying, and ethics issues. Because the board members requested that staff give a recommendation on any item of consideration, this created a systemic bias toward and deference to the staff recommendation (irrespective of the validity of that recommendation). Staff members were given great latitude in offering guidance on determining the application of the law, particularly when permitting someone to register to vote, receive a ballot, or waive further review on potential campaign finance or lobbying violations. These practices created and permitted inconsistent, subjective, and biased actions of unevenly enforcing the laws the agency administered.

GAB staff received low compensation in comparison to other state employees performing similar levels of work and extended work hours were a regular occurrence. These factors resulted in significant turnover. New staff received minimal, if any, formal training, instead relying on a “learn-as-you-go” onboarding strategy. There was not any formal process in place for objective performance evaluations of staff. Classifications were created and utilized that did not readily translate into other career opportunities or offer any significant opportunities for progression.

Incredibly, someone as transparently partisan as Shane Falk was appointed as a Staff Counsel and allowed to continue to serve in that role. He displayed open partisanship and blatant insubordination toward division administrators, the director, and the Board. He also enabled a climate at the GAB that made it acceptable to make offensive or disparaging remarks about political parties, candidates and elected officials. Other staff, including some in management, furthered and tolerated such a climate.

Ultimately, I decided to seek an opportunity in a larger agency for an alternative perspective. I began applying for other positions around May of 2015, and in September of 2015 I accepted a position as a Budget and Policy Analyst with the Department of Safety and Professional Services.

I was deeply humbled to receive an interview, and to be offered the position at the Ethics Commission in the summer of 2016. The theme of my response as to why I was best suited for the position was this: I was uniquely qualified based on a combination of my education (public management and public policy), my honest view of my experiences under the GAB and the agency’s strengths and weaknesses, my administrative experience at DSPS, as well as my military and combat-tested leadership in highly stressful situations.

I returned to the Ethics Commission on a mission to reinforce its foundation, put the house in order, and further fortify its structure. I am dedicated to improving trust and confidence in the agency. I believe my track record as Administrator, including my recent performance evaluation and what the Commissioners and I have chosen to make a priority, reflects my intentions and have helped the agency to succeed.



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DATE: For the December 5, 2017 Meeting

TO: Commissioners, Wisconsin Ethics Commission

FROM: Brian M. Bell, MPA
Commission Administrator

SUBJECT: Administrator's Performance Evaluation

Thank you for the opportunity to receive formal feedback from all of you regarding my performance as your Administrator. It is an honor to have this opportunity to represent you, and to be able to serve the people of Wisconsin every day. I consider myself very fortunate that you placed your faith in me when selecting the agency's first Administrator, and for that I am very grateful.

I have worked hard to continue things the public liked about the previous boards (like a staff that is accessible and responsive), to improve upon criticisms of past boards (like inconsistent advice or enforcement), while also trying to find innovative ways to be more efficient and effective while using the same or fewer resources (like empowering and supporting our staff, automating audits, and moving towards a paperless office).

I have enclosed some highlights of what we have accomplished together so far, a list of projects in progress, as well as considerations for future priorities. While I have provided direction, oversight, and decision-making, it is the tremendous staff that we have assembled that does much of the heavy lifting and deserves considerable praise for the agency's successes and accomplishments.

However, none of this would be possible without the backing and trust that each Commissioner has repeatedly shown for the staff. And your ability to work virtually by consensus and on a bipartisan basis is, in my opinion, what truly enables this agency to serve as a calm and steady hand, providing guidance to Wisconsin's government and those who seek to influence it.

To me, this is just the beginning. As amazing as it was to see what we accomplished since this agency's creation, I am even more excited about the direction we are going and what we can accomplish together in the years to follow. Again, thank you for this opportunity to serve for you, with you, and for the people of the State of Wisconsin. I look forward to receiving your feedback on what I have done well, what I can improve, and what you would like my priorities to be moving forward.

Accomplishments

- Instead of GAB's recommended 20-25 percent increase, agency budget request for FY-17-19 included a 0.5 percent decrease

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Administrator
Brian M. Bell, MPA

- Annual reports for 2016 and 2017 submitted prior to statutory deadline of October 15
- Scheduled an opportunity for LAB to present to the Commission on GAB audits
- Reviewed and implemented all applicable recommendations from the GAB audits
- Completed a review of all campaign finance-related advisory opinions from the previous boards, which the Commission withdrew due to lacking proper citations
- Renegotiated MOUs proposed by former GAB staff
 - Modified shared staffing MOU
 - Eliminated website and public information officer MOU
 - Simplified shared office space and data exchange MOUs, and added confidentiality protections
 - Estimated annual savings of \$268,500 salary and fringe benefits (assumes paying for half of Election Administrative Staff and Public Information Officer, and a 40 percent fringe rate)
- Drafted several objective internal policies and procedures, all adopted by the Commission
 - Nonpartisan staff policy
 - Complaints and investigations procedures
 - Standard settlement schedules
 - Campaign finance and lobbying audit schedules
- Created a new agency public website and saved about \$1,100 annually
- Conducted onboarding process for two new Commissioners
- Hired four staff members (Julie, David D. Caroline, Colette)
- Established weekly one-on-one meetings and quarterly performance evaluations with each staff member
- Arranged individual meeting with all 33 State Senators, 69 State Representatives, 4 Constitutional Officers, and the Office of the Governor to speak about how the Commission is different from previous boards, answer questions they might have, and remind them that we are an available resource
- Updated all ethics forms and campaign finance forms (lobbying “forms” are all through the Eye On Lobbying website)
- Initiated updating Administrative Rules ETH 6 and repealing ETH 21 to split former GAB rules between the Ethics Commission and Elections Commission
- Initiated the repeal of ETH 25 (forms and form names) and the creation of ETH 26 (standard settlement schedules), which would allow the Commission to delegate the authority to issue settlement offers base on the standards to the Administrator; both become effective February 1, 2018
- Submitted a Scope Statement for ETH 16 to update the lobbying administrative rule
- Requested new office space, resulting in over \$27,000 annual savings (39 percent lower than current lease)
- FY 17 Operating Budget was \$864,274 out of available \$1,425,800 (operated on less than 61 percent of available appropriations)
- Processed and presented to the Commission 30 complaints
- Addressed 25 requests for advice and issued eight informal advisory opinions
- Reduced the number of outstanding settlement offers from 132 to 24
- Processed 447 requests for termination by registered committees
- Increased the frequency of several campaign finance audits

- Prepared approximately 250 boxes of paper records inherited from the previous board to either be sent to the Wisconsin Historical Society or State Records Center for archiving
- Conducted campaign finance, lobbying, and ethics training for legislative employees, WEDC staff and board members
- Created Updated CFIS and Eye on Lobbying training materials and user manuals
- Created a new mission statement, program objectives, and performance measures to develop a comprehensive performance management strategy for the agency

Projects in Progress

- Began planning for modernizing the campaign finance and lobbying website applications to a mobile-first, mobile-responsive design
- Updating all campaign finance forms
- Developing training resources for committees and treasurers
- Development of a paperless, online SEI filing system
 - Annual Filing
 - Candidate Filing
 - Appointed/nominated officials filing
 - SWIB Quarterly reports
 - Requests to view SEIs
 - Establish MOUs with State Court System and UW System
- Automating email notifications (e.g., filing reminders, late filing notice)
- Review of lobbying and ethics opinions of the previous board
- Working with DOA to develop tiered Ethics Specialist classification that would offer the potential for advancement within the agency
- Enactment of legislation based on the recommendations included in the annual report

Potential Future Priorities

- Create a single portal for public access/analysis of campaign finance, lobbying, ethics data
- Connect related entities across reporting systems (e.g., lobbying principal with its PAC/conduit, candidate with elected official)
- Automate audits and related notifications (e.g., a “report card” upon filing a report listing potential issues to review: cash balance, contribution limit, etc.)
- Create an online application for tracking and collecting settlements.
- Review and update existing guidelines and create new guidelines as needed (e.g., joint fundraisers, use of social media, 50-piece rule, strictly personal use, etc.)
- Create a customer satisfaction survey and require staff include a link to it on every email
- Increase outreach and training efforts with the regulated communities, media, academics, and the public

Amid John Doe fallout, heads of Wisconsin ethics and elections commissions fight for their jobs

Patrick Marley, Milwaukee Journal Sentinel Published 8:19 a.m. CT Jan. 15, 2018 | Updated 11:01 a.m. CT Jan. 15, 2018



(Photo: Michael Sears / Milwaukee Journal Sentinel)

MADISON - Brian Bell removed roadside bombs in Iraq and Afghanistan, so the efforts now to force him out of his job as the head of the state Ethics Commission are mild by comparison.

"No one's — at least not yet — trying to shoot at me or blow me up," Bell said in a recent interview down the street from the Capitol.

But the risks for Bell — as well as Michael Haas, the director of the state Elections Commission — are real. Republicans who control the state Senate say they plan to vote Jan. 23 to deny their confirmations as a way to push them out of their jobs.

The GOP senators are trying to drive them out of their posts because the pair previously worked for the now-disbanded Government Accountability Board, which spent years investigating Gov. Scott Walker and other Republicans.

Bell and Haas said they have conducted themselves professionally and there is no reason they should leave. Bell was not involved in the investigations of Republicans. Haas was not part of the core investigation team, but did review legal filings when a John Doe probe of Walker's campaign was challenged in court.

The two have the unanimous support of their commissions, each consisting of three Republicans and three Democrats. The backing from GOP commissioners appears to have done little to relieve the concerns of Republicans who control the Senate 18-13.

In 2015, Walker and Republican lawmakers approved dissolving the accountability board because of its role in the John Doe investigation of the campaigns of Walker and other Republicans. The move came soon after the state Supreme Court terminated the probe, finding nothing illegal occurred.

Legislators replaced the accountability board with the bipartisan ethics and elections commissions, which chose Bell and Haas as their leaders.

The pair came under renewed scrutiny last month when GOP Attorney General Brad Schimel issued a report on his attempts to find out who leaked secret material from the probe in 2016 to the Guardian U.S. newspaper.



Brian Bell is the administrator of the state Ethics Commission. (Photo: Brian Bell)

Schimel wasn't able to figure out who leaked the material but found it came from the accountability board. That prompted Republican lawmakers to call for Bell and Haas to go.

Bell joined the military at 17 and is a captain in the Army Reserve. He volunteered to go to Iraq in 2006 and was deployed to Afghanistan in 2010.

In 2012, he took a job with the accountability board. He collected election statistics for counties and municipalities and later regulated lobbyists.

He left that job in 2015 in part because he didn't like the way the accountability board was run and became a budget analyst with the Department of Safety and Professional Services.

"I'm very confident that I've conducted myself in a nonpartisan and respectful manner and that an investigation could illustrate that the allegations I've acted otherwise could be proven false," Bell said.

Fiedler has sought to interview Senate Majority Leader Scott Fitzgerald (R-Juneau) and Sen. Steve Nass (R-Whitewater), who have criticized Bell and called for his ouster. They have declined to talk to him.

In a Thursday letter to Fiedler, Nass wrote that his investigation smacked of "intimidation" and was "an attempt to interfere with the Wisconsin State Senate's role of confirmation."

He wrote that he thought Bell had not properly secured sensitive records and had not cooperated enough with the leak investigation. He wrote that he had told Bell a year ago he had reservations about his appointment because he previously worked for the accountability board.

"I felt then and now that the Ethics Commission won't be able to exit the clouds of the GAB scandal without appointing an administrator free of any connections to that rogue agency," he wrote.

Haas is getting a similar reception. He has been working on elections issues for the state for nine years and has endured fights over recalls, recounts, hacking attempts and voter ID.

"I would challenge anybody in the Senate to find anyone I have dealt with in the last nine years who wouldn't say I have treated them with respect and civility," he said.

In recent weeks, Haas has sought meetings with Fitzgerald without success. He said he is frustrated that Fitzgerald won't allow a confirmation hearing before the vote.

"That's one disappointing aspect, to not have any communication, any willingness to explain what they think I did wrong," he said.

Haas ran unsuccessfully for the Assembly as a Democrat in 1992 and 1994. After that, he worked for a decade as a municipal attorney for Stoughton, Edgerton and Milton and then took jobs with the accountability board and Elections Commission.

He said his partisan past is well behind him and he has worked in an even-handed manner. Democrats and Republicans alike were frustrated by decisions the accountability board made, as is typical in matters dealing with campaign finance and how elections are run, he said.

Republicans "didn't invent outrage about elections or the GAB," he said.

Bell and Haas did not say what they would do if they are rejected by the Senate.

Elections Commission Chairman Mark Thomsen, a Democrat, has said he does not believe the Senate has the power to remove Haas and raised the prospect the Senate would have to sue his commission to try to remove him. Haas said he is focused on trying to win the vote and will determine later what he'll do if he loses it.

Likewise, Bell said he is hoping he can survive the vote and is not sure what he'll do if it doesn't go his way.