

GOVERNMENT

Reeves asks MDOT for proof of political pressure so he can investigate, take corrective action

BY BOBBY HARRISON | JULY 11, 2018



Rogelio V. Solis, Associated Press

Lt. Gov. Tate Reeves carries his speaking points as he leaves a news conference where he spoke about controversial state-funded road projects, including one near his gated community, during a news conference Wednesday, July 11, 2018, at the Capitol in Jackson, Miss.

Lt. Gov. Tate Reeves denies any involvement in the decision to construct a \$2 million frontage road from his subdivision to a traffic light to provide easier access to busy Lakeland Drive in Rankin County.

At a news conference at the Capitol Wednesday, where he accused members of the media of either being confused or of intentionally misrepresenting facts, Reeves said he would send a letter to Mississippi Department of Transportation executive director Melinda McGrath asking who in the Senate tried to influence the agency to construct the frontage road.

In an article earlier this week in the Clarion Ledger, McGrath said “political pressure” from the Senate led to the decision of MDOT to commit to constructing the frontage road.

“I am not aware of any undue influence on that particular project,” Reeves countered Wednesday to members of the media during a news conference in a Senate committee room.

Reeves’ denial of his involvement was bolstered earlier Wednesday, when Central District Transportation Commissioner Dick Hall said at a news conference that he had not been in contact with any legislator nor with Reeves about the frontage road. Hall said he made the decision to construct the frontage road for safety reasons.

The frontage road would be located between two gated neighborhoods, consisting of fewer than 150 homes, to a red light at a shopping center to make it easier for the residents to turn left back toward Jackson. No other businesses or neighborhoods would benefit from the frontage road.

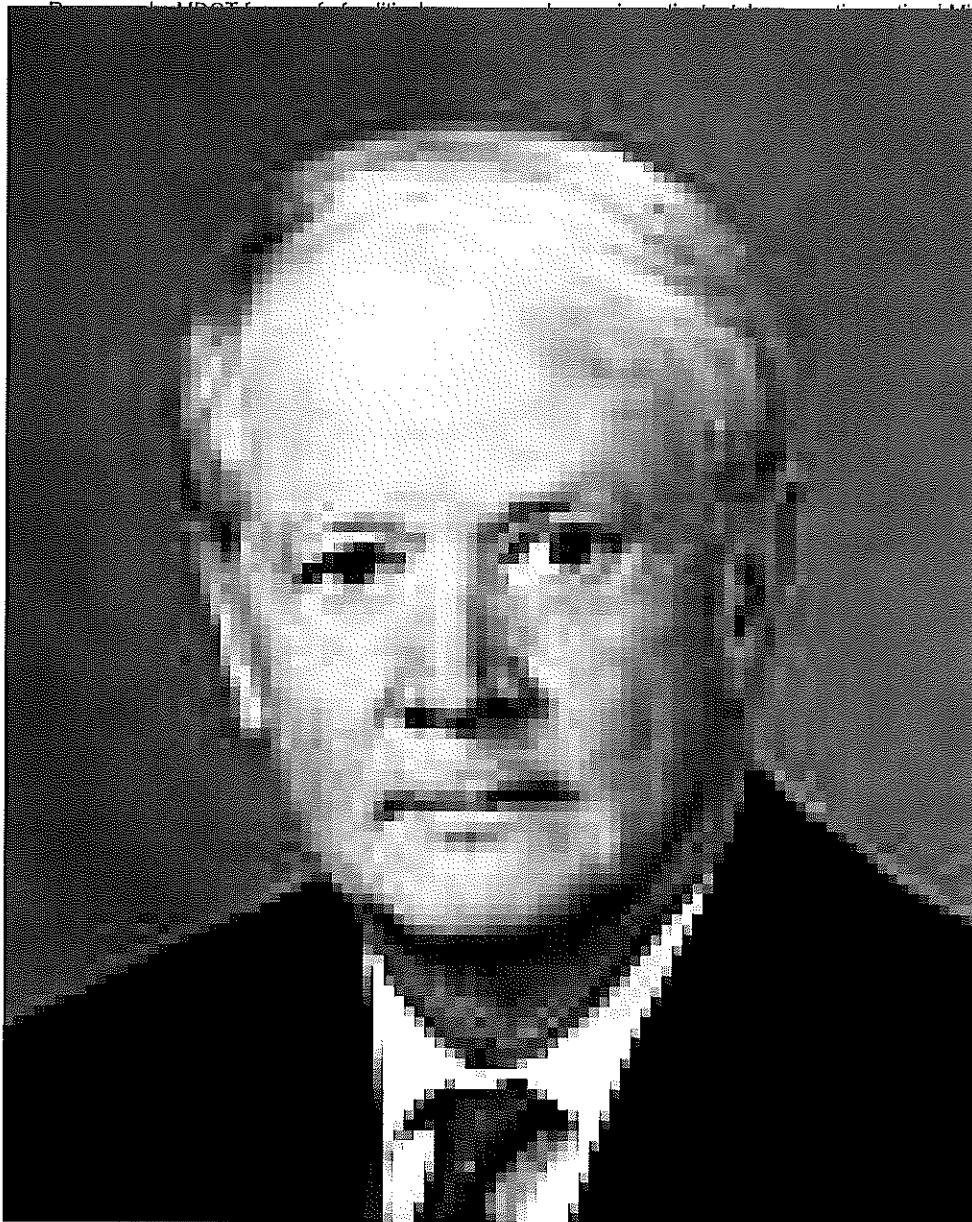
On Tuesday, Hall announced he was postponing the project, which was set to be bid out for construction later this month. He said he wanted to re-assess whether the project is needed because of safety concerns. Plus, he acknowledged that media reports influenced his decision to postpone it.

“I don’t know of anything inappropriate,” Hall said. “If I was the lieutenant governor, I would have interest (in the project) and would have made my interest known. Nobody did anything illegal.”

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MDOT

Central District Highway Commissioner Dick Hall

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The Clarion Ledger, in an [editorial \(https://www.clarionledger.com/story/opinion/editorials/2018/07/11/mdot-should-kill-road-project-investigation-needed-into-reeves-influence/774637002/\)](https://www.clarionledger.com/story/opinion/editorials/2018/07/11/mdot-should-kill-road-project-investigation-needed-into-reeves-influence/774637002/), also called for investigation into the matter although it remains unclear who would conduct such a probe. Any investigation launched by Jim Hood, who is the state's top law enforcement official in his job as attorney general, could be seen as politically motivated.

Hood, who declined to comment on this story, and Reeves are expected to face off in next year's governor's race.

The head of the state ethics commission, Tom Hood, is Jim Hood's brother. And for his agency to get involved with a case, he said: "(W)e'd need to prove that the person received some monetary benefit. That's defined pretty broadly, but usually that has to be money in his bank account or something makes his property more valuable... and we'd have to prove it by clear and convincing evidence."

The state auditor also investigates potential misspending of taxpayer funds, but a spokesman for that



Rogelio V. Solis, AP

Attorney General Jim Hood

office said the auditor does not confirm or deny the existence of investigative matters.

State Sen. David Blount, D-Jackson, who serves on the state Senate Ethics Committee, said the committee only considers changes to state ethics laws. Sen. Chris Massey, R-Nesbit, who chairs the ethics committee, did not return a telephone call seeking comment.

Reeves acknowledged that he did lobby MDOT strongly for the completion of a widening project from four to six lanes of a section of Lakeland Drive near his home in Rankin County because of the fast growth in the area.

That project has been completed. He also conceded that the neighborhood association where he lives voiced their concerns about the intersection. The association apparently opposed a plan by MDOT engineers to construct a much cheaper U-turn for the residents of the neighborhoods to use to go left on Lakeland. MDOT engineers said placing a traffic light at the location was not a viable option because of the proximity of the neighborhoods' intersection with Lakeland Drive to other traffic lights.

Emails the Clarion Ledger obtained indicate that some members of the lieutenant governor's staff, whom the paper did not name, inquired about the frontage road issue. Reeves told reporters he knew little about the issue and did not engage with the neighborhood association in its communications with the Department of Transportation.

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In his letter to McGrath, Reeves said, "If you have any unacceptable interaction with anyone in the Legislature on this or any other project that go outside the bounds of the body's duty to be engaged in monitoring the department and holding it accountable, I need to know about it so I can investigate and take corrective steps if warranted."

Reeves cited countless times where he or his staff had inquired about transportation projects or other projects on behalf of constituents. He said that is the constitutional duty of legislators who have the ultimate say on what projects are funded.

Earlier this week, Mississippi Today also reported (<https://mississippitoday.org/2018/07/10/lawmakers-requested-163m-for-pet-projects-even-as-they-criticized-mdot-spending/>) that since 2012 lawmakers have requested more than \$163 million for special projects in their districts despite leaders' pointed criticism of MDOT spending.

Reeves said it was appropriate for legislators to heed the advice of MDOT engineers on what projects to fund, but that legislators had the right to have the final say — if they chose to — through the passage of bills.

A spokesman for MDOT said McGrath is reviewing Reeves' letter, but that she was not available to comment.
