

## Two Lawmakers Rack up Thousands in Unpaid Ethics Fines

Published: Thursday, 20 May 2021 08:02

By Rick Brundrett - The Nerve

Since 2015, two sitting House members have owed thousands in civil fines after receiving public reprimands for campaign reporting violations, records reviewed by The Nerve show.

Rep. Cezar McKnight, D-Williamsburg, who is an attorney, owes \$59,150.88 to the Senate Ethics Committee, committee lawyer J.J. Gentry said in an initial written response in January to The Nerve, citing information from the S.C. Department of Revenue.

Out of a total \$60,190 in fines imposed against McKnight, \$1,039.12, or less than 2%, had been collected, Gentry said then – though the amount was not paid directly to the Ethics Committee but instead was collected through SCDOR’s debt-collection program, which involves deductions from income tax refunds.

Asked for an update, Gentry in an email response Tuesday said, “Nothing has changed with Cezar McKnight.”

Rep. Carl Anderson, D-Georgetown, hasn’t paid any of his \$6,000 in fines imposed by the Senate Ethics Committee, Gentry confirmed Tuesday. At his request, he was put on a payment plan that is supposed to start by the end of next month and requires minimum monthly payments of \$100, Gentry said, though he didn’t immediately know when that arrangement was made.

With \$100 monthly payments, Anderson, who is a minister and insurance agent, according to the Legislature’s website, would pay off his debt in five years.

Asked how often the Senate Ethics Committee allows payment plans, Gentry replied, “All candidates (legislators and non-legislators) are given the opportunity to set up a payment plan with the Committee prior to being submitted to the SCDOR debt collection program.”

Neither McKnight nor Anderson responded to written and phone messages Tuesday from The Nerve seeking comment on their cases. Sen. Sean Bennett, R-Dorchester, who is the Senate Ethics Committee chairman but who wasn’t on the committee when McKnight and Anderson were fined, also didn’t respond to written and phone messages Tuesday from The Nerve.

Among other questions, Bennett was asked why it has taken approximately six years to collect fines from the two lawmakers.

The Nerve first contacted the Senate Ethics Committee in January after noticing the committee’s [online](#) fines list hadn’t been updated since June 2018. McKnight’s and Anderson’s unpaid fines are included on that list.

The Nerve in the following months asked several times when the list would be updated. Gentry in

## Two Lawmakers Rack up Thousands in Unpaid Ethics Fines

written responses said he was conducting an audit of those who owed fines to the committee, noting that McKnight and Anderson were the only current legislators with outstanding fines.  
By Rick Brundrett - The Nerve

Hits: 520

In his latest response Tuesday, Gentry said he had not yet finished the audit, explaining that he is “trying to get all of the former candidates’ fines accurate and up to date based on their filings.”

“I can tell you the main reason for the fines is that they either did not file campaign reports or they filed late campaign reports,” adding that no fines are owed by former senators.

State law requires that candidates for elected office file quarterly reports with the State Ethics Commission listing details of campaign contributions and expenses.

### ‘Inadvertent oversight’

Both McKnight’s and Anderson’s fines stemmed from their unsuccessful campaigns in the special Democratic primary election in September 2014 for a Senate seat that was won by current Sen. Ronnie Sabb of Williamsburg County. McKnight was first elected to the House in November 2014; Anderson became a House member in 2004.

The 10-member Senate Ethics Committee, then chaired by Sen. Luke Rankin, R-Horry, in August 2015 publicly reprimanded McKnight for violating state ethics law and imposed a total of \$54,000 in civil fines – \$1,000 for each of the 31 unreported campaign expenditures totaling \$25,881, and \$1,000 for each of the 23 unreported campaign contributions totaling \$9,361 – related to the 2014 special primary election, according to the written order.

The order said the \$54,000 was in addition to \$6,190 in collective fines previously imposed by the Ethics Committee for McKnight’s “failure to timely file quarterly campaign disclosure reports” related to the 2012 primary election for the same Senate seat.

In his written defense, which was included in the order, McKnight said his reporting issues related to the 2014 special primary campaign were “simply inadvertent oversight on my part.”

“Most importantly, I had to self-finance the vast majority of my campaign,” McKnight wrote. “So in my haste to pay for items for campaign activities, I would write checks from either my personal bank account or my law practice’s General Account to pay for items for the campaign.”

“Then I would subsequently reimburse myself for some of my personal money that I expended,” McKnight continued.

“I can assure the Committee that these transfers were not done for any illegal or otherwise nefarious reasons,” McKnight wrote, adding that he would withdraw his dispute of the fine for not “timely filing” campaign reports and “humbly ask for a significantly large reduction in the amount of the fine.”

## Two Lawmakers Rack up Thousands in Unpaid Ethics Fines

By Rick Brundrett - The Nerve  
Published Tuesday, 20 May 2015 10:02  
Punishing McKnight, the committee in its order said it “takes notice of the fact that Representative McKnight is an attorney licensed to practice law in South Carolina.”

Hits: 520  
“As such, he reasonably should have known and appreciated the importance of maintaining adequate records of checks and balances on his campaign banking account and complying with the campaign disclosure reporting obligations,” the committee said.

The committee also said McKnight’s reporting failures “misled the public, as well as the other candidates” in the 2014 special primary election.

### Anderson’s case

As for Anderson, the Senate Ethics Committee in April 2015 publicly reprimanded him for violating state ethics law and imposed a total of \$6,000 in civil fines – \$2,000 for filing a false campaign disclosure report, \$2,000 for failing to report a total of \$8,675 in campaign contributions, and \$2,000 for failing to report a total of \$10,789 in campaign expenditures – related to the 2014 special primary election, according to the written order.

The committee found “no evidence of criminal intent, and, therefore, these are all civil violations,” the order said. It noted Anderson falsely reported a \$2,797 payment to a credit card, but that he had used the same card to make legitimate campaign-related purchases totaling \$3,841, though he failed to report those expenditures.

In addition to the fines owed to the committee, the order also required Anderson to pay \$735 to the state Children’s Trust Fund, which represented the amount of “anonymous cash contributions that Representative Anderson accepted and deposited into his Senate campaign banking account.” State law bans anonymous campaign contributions, and candidates who violate that provision must remit those donations to the Trust Fund.

Under the orders, Anderson and McKnight were supposed to have paid their total fines stemming from the 2014 special primary election by June 1, 2015, and Sept. 30, 2015, respectively. Neither deadline was met.

The Senate and House Ethics committees primarily police the ethical behavior of lawmakers in their respective chambers. There are 46 senators and 124 House members.

By law, ethics violations carry either civil or criminal penalties depending on the situation, which leaves plenty of wiggle room for interpretation.

***Brundrett is the news editor of The Nerve ([www.thenerve.org](http://www.thenerve.org)). Contact him at 803-254-4411 or [rick@thenerve.org](mailto:rick@thenerve.org). Follow him on Twitter @RickBrundrett. Follow The Nerve on Facebook and Twitter @thenervesc.***