



Holmes County
ADVERTISER
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Sunshine Law case concludes with mixed outcomes for HCDC officials



By GARETT VALCOURT 🕒 Oct 22, 2025 💬 0 Comments 🏷️ #crime #Development Commission

#HCDC #Holmes County #Holmes County Development Commission



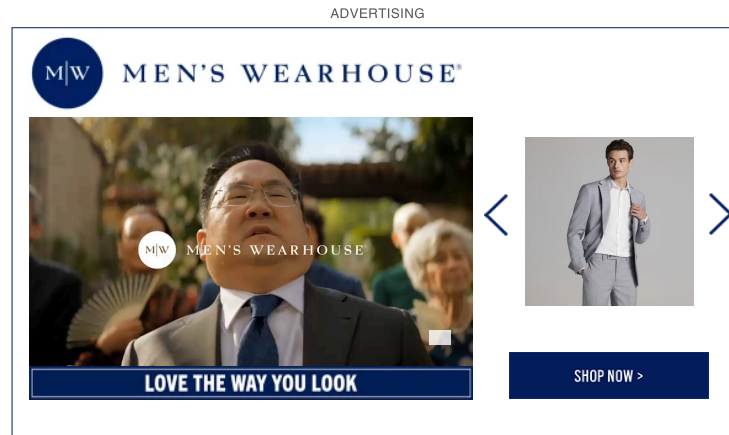
Judge Douglas Wade Mercer found Holmes County Development Commission Executive Director Joe Rone guilty of conspiracy to commit a Sunshine Law violation on October 22, while charges against former board member Stephanie Cloud were dismissed following her resignation from the board. Mercer described the infraction as “about as innocuous a violation as you can.”

A months-long investigation into alleged Sunshine Law violations by members of the Holmes County Development Commission (HCDC) concluded Wednesday with one conviction and one case dismissed.

Following a non-jury trial on October 22, Judge Douglas Wade Mercer found HCDC Executive Director Joe Rone guilty of one charge of public order crimes public meeting law violation, specifically conspiracy to commit a Sunshine Law violation, a second-degree misdemeanor. In delivering his decision, Judge Mercer noted the technical nature of the infraction, stating, "This is about as innocuous a violation as you can."

While Rone was found guilty, Judge Mercer stated that, "Coming to court is punishment enough." Rone faces no further punishment or fine.

ADVERTISING



The advertisement is a rectangular banner. At the top left is the Men's Wearhouse logo, consisting of a blue circle with 'M|W' in white, followed by the text 'MEN'S WEARHOUSE' in blue. Below the logo is a large image of a man in a dark suit and tie, looking slightly to the side. Overlaid on this image is a smaller version of the Men's Wearhouse logo. To the right of this image is a smaller image of a man in a light blue suit jacket and white shirt, standing with his hands in his pockets. Between these two images are blue left and right arrow symbols. Below the large image is a dark blue bar with the text 'LOVE THE WAY YOU LOOK' in white. Below the smaller image is a dark blue bar with the text 'SHOP NOW >' in white.

MEN'S WEARHOUSE

LOVE THE WAY YOU LOOK

SHOP NOW >

The case stemmed from allegations that Rone and then-board member Stephanie Cloud engaged in private discussions regarding potential officer nominations for the HCDC board outside of a properly noticed public meeting.

According to court documents and investigative affidavits filed last year, Rone allegedly provided Cloud with a list of potential officer candidates and directed her to contact other board members to discuss the nominations. Investigators stated that Cloud subsequently reached out to multiple members of the nominating committee, by phone and voicemail, to discuss the list. The actions, conducted

outside of the public eye and without recorded minutes, were cited as a violation of Florida's Government-in-the-Sunshine Law.

The State Attorney's Office for the 14th Judicial Circuit confirmed that Cloud's case was dismissed on October 22 after the court determined she had already resigned from the HCDC Board, rendering further prosecution unnecessary.

The investigation was originally launched in October 2024 following complaints that members of the HCDC had been conducting official business privately. Investigators wrote that both Rone and Cloud had been "warned many times" that the Development Commission was subject to Florida's open-government requirements.

The Sunshine Law, codified in Chapter 286 of Florida Statutes, ensures that governmental meetings and deliberations are conducted publicly and with proper notice to citizens. Violations of the statute, even when unintentional, are treated as second-degree misdemeanors.

A representative of the Holmes County Advertiser did reach out to Rone, who chose not to release an official statement regarding the outcome of the case.