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September 10, 2013

To: Gene Valentino, Chairman
Board of County Commissioners
221 Palafox St., Ste. 400
Pensacola, FL 32502

Dear Commissioner Valentino:

This letter serves to express a serious concern regarding last Friday's headline story that appeared in the Pensacola News Journal (PNJ) (September 06, 2013) titled: "Chamber Oks tourism change," as well as the follow-up headline story on Tuesday (09/10/13) appearing in the PNJ titled: "Tourism handover on table."

I got the impression that there are no other players or stakeholders involved in tourist promotion efforts in Greater Pensacola-Escambia County, Florida other than those business organizations mentioned in the headline stories in the PNJ.

The Gulf Coast African American Chamber of Commerce (GCAACC) has a direct stake in who will have control over tourism promotion and how public bed tax dollars are spent.

The GCAACC just very recently submitted a proposed budget (09/05/13) to the Board of County Commission (BOCC) for fiscal year 2014. The proposed budget consisted of two components. A program of work for: (1) Economic Development Services and (2) Tourism Promotion.

The GCAACC Tourism Promotion component primarily dealt with a plan to increase Minority visitors (particularly African American visitors) by as much as 10-12% over a two year period of 2014-2015 to the Greater Pensacola area, through Family Reunions, Regional Conferences and Conventions as well as Civic and Social Gatherings, Entertainment Events and Religious Conventions (such as the AME Church Convention that is going on this week in Pensacola, Florida, September 7-13, 2013).

The GCAACC is a 14 year old business organization that was founded in Greater Pensacola to serve as an advocate and the conscience of the African American and Minority Business Community. Over the 14 years of existence, the GCAACC has continuously experienced discrimination and economic disparity in the disbursement of public funds administered by the BOCC and the City of Pensacola.

The “Lion” share of public dollars for tourist promotion (approximately over \$5 Million dollars annually) has always gone to the Pensacola Chamber, the Perdido Key Chamber, and Pensacola Sports Association. None of these organizations have ever had a plan nor have they cared about a plan to increase the volume of African American visitors, Minority Business and other civic and social organizations to our area as a tourist and conference/convention destination.

And now comes talk of the possibility of tourist promotion being turned over to an independent board favored by local hoteliers. According to news reports, the centerpiece of the hoteliers plan is a nine-member board that would lead tourism efforts. There were a number of business organizations mentioned that would make up this so-called independent board except....you guessed it!, the GCAACC, as if we don’t exist.

The GCAACC must be part of any conversation regarding tourist promotion and the use of public dollars. The GCAACC is looking directly to the BOCC to completely level the playing field in regards to the disbursement of any public funds for the new direction for tourist promotion. And it should also include an equal number of persons from both the white and black community who understand the importance of “True Diversity and Inclusion” for any public and private endeavor to be successful in the Greater Pensacola community.

The mainstream media both print and broadcast in the Greater Pensacola area have purposely avoided any extensive or comprehensive news report about the economic disparities and discrimination against the GCAACC, the African American Business Community as well as the African American community at-large.

The GCAACC must be part of the Economic Growth and Development of the Greater Pensacola-Escambia County, Florida area. The GCAACC will hold the BOCC to be fully accountable to once and for all level the playing field and eliminate racial disparities against the GCAACC regarding any disbursements of public dollars for tourist promotion and economic development services for the betterment of the community at-large, the Minority Business Community and the African American community.

Sincerely,

Admiral L. LeRoy, Jr.

Admiral L. LeRoy, Jr., Executive Director
Gulf Coast African American Chamber of Commerce
850.417.9922 (direct)

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