

District Attorney Smittcamp forms ‘public integrity’ unit to root out corruption

By John
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Fresno County District Attorney Lisa A. Smittcamp announced on Wednesday, May 6, 2015, a Public Integrity Unit to pursue public corruption or election-related crime. Read the story:

<http://www.fresnobee.com/2015/05/06/4512682/district-attorney-lisa-smittcamp.html> THEFRESNOBEE

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Fresno County District Attorney Lisa A. Smittcamp on Wednesday said she was forming a “public integrity” unit that will investigate possible public corruption or election-related crimes.



The team will have a deputy district attorney and two investigators. It will be managed by one of Smittcamp’s top lieutenants, Assistant District Attorney Blake Gunderson.



Their charge: investigate and, if necessary, prosecute public officials or public employees who commit crimes relating to their official duties. It also could mean investigating candidates for violating election law or voter fraud involving average citizens.

“It is designed to provide a service to the community so that we can ensure that all of our public officials and our elected officials are coloring inside the lines,” Smittcamp said at a news conference at the DA’s financial crimes offices on L Street in downtown Fresno. She was surrounded by her top aides and members of the public integrity unit.

Possible investigations would be launched for improper use of public funds, elections violations, conflicts of interest, voter fraud, perjury or violating residency requirements when running for office or the Brown Act — the state’s open meeting law — while in office.

Smittcamp’s announcement is much like one made shortly after Elizabeth Egan, the prior Fresno County district attorney, took office in 2003. At the time, Egan acknowledged the office had been criticized for avoiding political corruption cases such those prompted by the Operation Rezone influence-peddling investigations of the mid-1990s, but said under her there would be zero tolerance for abuse of public trust.

In 12 years, however, there were no prosecutions.

Smittcamp worked under Egan, but said she wasn’t part of that team.

“I know there were some investigations that took place, but as far as I understand there were never any actual prosecutions as a result of those investigations,” Smittcamp said.

There was no particular event, such as the arrest of former Fresno police Deputy Chief Keith Foster on federal drug charges, that prompted the unit’s formation, Smittcamp said. She said it was simply an attempt address a law enforcement area that needs more resources. Most major California counties, she said, have public integrity units.

Fresno County Clerk Brandi Orth had forwarded voter fraud or candidate residency complaints to the Secretary of State’s Office, as is the practice in counties with no public corruption units. But the Secretary of State has just three investigators statewide, and Orth said the office recently informed her that because of limited resources, it will only be

investigating state officeholders.

Because of that, Orth — who was consulted by Smittcamp on the change ahead of time — welcomed the move.

“We’re very excited that Lisa has felt that this is an important topic and is willing to spend resources to investigate and possibly prosecute those that are involved in wrongdoing,” Orth said.

The new unit will work with both Orth’s office and the Fresno County Grand Jury.

There will be no additional costs for the unit, and Smittcamp stressed that no case is too small. Her office is making it easy to submit a complaint, which can be anonymous. Complaints can be sent in via mail, fax — or by email at publicintegrity@co.fresno.ca.us.

But, she added: “They must provide sufficient evidence to justify further investigation.”

One thing the unit won’t do is be used as any sort of political weapon. When Smittcamp was asked if the prosecutor and investigators might harass her political opponents, her reply was swift: “That’s preposterous, frankly.”

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