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Public trust in local government depends on independent decision-making. When individuals hold overlapping roles across public boards, contracted vendors, and political advocacy, particularly while active city business is underway, citizens are entitled to ask whether decisions were made at arm's length and solely in the public interest.

Oklahoma ethics guidance and widely accepted municipal best practices emphasize disclosure, appropriate recusal, and clear separation between public authority and private or political activity.<sup>12</sup> These guardrails exist to protect the integrity of decisions involving public revenue, contracts, and services such as police and fire protection.

In Muskogee, residents observed overlapping roles during key decisions related to annexation and tourism governance. Daniel Chepkauskas, a political lobbyist, publicly advocated on behalf of a private client opposing annexation while also serving in positions connected to city-adjacent authorities. Avery Frix, a Muskogee politician, was previously associated with a city tourism contract while holding public office, placing private contractual interests and later public authority within the same sphere. Councilwoman Jaime Stout, a sitting member of City Council, took positions aligned with annexation opposition during council deliberations. Taken together, these overlapping roles raised reasonable public questions about independence and influence during consequential city decisions.<sup>345</sup>

The concern is not that overlapping roles are automatically improper. Rather, without robust disclosure and clear guardrails, overlapping roles can blur accountability and weaken public confidence. Even the appearance of undue influence can undermine trust, invite legal challenges, and complicate the City's ability to defend its actions—diverting time and resources away from core services.

Healthy governance requires transparency and independence, especially during periods of leadership transition. Clear disclosure of roles, consistent recusal practices, and separation between advocacy and public authority help ensure decisions are made for Muskogee's benefit—not shaped by insider alignment. This briefing explains why scrutiny of influence is essential to protecting public trust and the City's long-term interests.

## Sources & References

1. Oklahoma Ethics Commission Rules and advisory opinions addressing conflicts of interest, disclosure, and recusal for public officials.
2. Oklahoma Attorney General opinions regarding avoidance of undue influence and the importance of independent municipal decision-making.
3. Public City Council records and media coverage documenting annexation debates and advocacy positions.
4. City and authority records identifying overlapping roles across boards, vendors, and political activity during the relevant period.

5. International City/County Management Association (ICMA) guidance on ethical local governance and separation of roles.

**FOR MORE INFORMATION, PLEASE CONTACT:**

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