# Funny business has no place on council

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The gaslighting and false narratives really have to stop. At last week's Pine Bluff City Council meeting, the rush job was to move some $800,000 in tax revenues into the Urban Renewal Agency's coffers so work could continue on the money pits known as the Sixth and Main project and the go-kart track.

When questions flew, Mayor Shirley Washington was quick to blame the funding shortfall for the projects on the Delta Rhythm and Bayous project. She said it was the dang $2 million that the Delta project took that just messed up everything, budgetwise. If you're keeping score, Jimmy Cunningham, who somehow keeps his focus on pushing his Delta project forward despite everything, is the bad guy — again.

In fact, Cunningham's project was approved for the $2 million funding by the City Council back in 2022 when the council was approving the 2023 budget. He was to get about a fourth of the money in 2023 and three-fourths in 2024.

Comments from council members then and over the intervening months show that the funding for his project was never tied to the passage of the five-eighths-cent sales tax that funded Go Forward Pine Bluff projects.

In that Dec. 30, 2022, story in The Commercial, it was Council Member Bruce Lockett who said: "We will not renege on this. Everything Mr. Cunningham has come to this council with has been approved by all eight of us. Have faith we can do this."

In that same story, Washington said the commitment to Cunningham would be kept, and Council Member Steven Shaner echoed the mayor's sentiments.

Even then, though, Cunningham highly suspected there would be problems, because instead of appropriating the money to him, the council put it with Go Forward's little sister public agency, Urban Renewal.

To highlight his concern, Cunningham pleaded with Shaner to follow through on the promise.

"I want you to protect our funding," Cunningham told Shaner. "I want you to build a moat around it so there's no funny business."

But there's been nothing but funny business ever since. In 2023, Cunningham had to fight for the first $600,000, and now that he's gotten the rest of his promised funding, he's being blamed again.

Again, it should be noted that at no time was Cunningham's money tied to the sales tax renewal. That line of argument only started when the tax didn't pass and Go Forward sympathizers, that being the mayor and most of the council, started fretting over the loss in funding for Go Forward projects.

Which brings us to a wonderful point that a non-go Forward sympathizer raised, that being that if blame is going to be laid at the feet of some appropriation, the hotel project's funding should be first in line. The hotel was never going to require any tax dollars at all, but then suddenly it needed $3 million. Then poof, that tax money was gone so fast from Urban Renewal's coffers it was almost like it was never there. There's the budget shortfall — not Cunningham's $2 million that was already budgeted.

But the hotel is a sweet spot for Go Forward so Washington wasn't going to point the finger of blame there. No, let's pick on Cunningham, whose project is the only one that has been vetted and has a business plan and shows a distinct profit, unlike the projects Go Forward has gotten behind — like those downtown buildings and property that were bought. How's that investment going? Still zero returns?

Speaking of business plans, it's worth noting that Lockett said at last week's council meeting that he had been trying for years to get the budget for the Sixth and Main project and the go-kart track extravaganza but had never been given one — until a dozen days before the end of the year when Go Forward really needed that money transferred out of the control of a council whose makeup is changing and not to their favor. Translated, Lockett is a member of a city council that's having to pay for much of these projects but he hasn't been able to find out how much they'll cost in tax dollars or for how long they'll need tax dollars to operate. Transparency? Not so much.