



Press Release
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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:

**FORMER SCHOOL DISTRICT BOARD MEMBER PLEADS GUILTY TO
ETHICS CHARGES**

A former Madison-Plains School Board member entered guilty pleas on Monday, November 20, 2006 to two criminal ethics charges filed in Madison County Municipal Court. As a result of an Ethics Commission investigation, Blenda James admitted that she used her authority as a public school board member to obtain a series of employment contracts with the high school for her husband, Jim James, and her daughter, Andrea James.

Judge David Picken sentenced James to pay fines and costs totaling \$1,183. He also ordered her to pay as restitution to the Madison-Plains School District the public money illegally expended by the board to pay her daughter, up to a total of \$54,000. The Ohio Auditor of State had also issued a finding for recovery against James and two other board members, which is pending with the Ohio Attorney General's Office for collection.

James had been removed from the school board on September 27, 2004 by Madison County Common Pleas Judge Robert Nichols in a separate civil action brought against the board by a group of local citizens. In that case, the Court found that James and three other board members should be removed for knowingly hiring James' daughter as a Spanish teacher, even though she was neither qualified nor certified to teach Spanish. In addition, the Court found that these board members repeatedly violated Ohio's Open Meetings Law and related areas of the law.

Madison County Prosecutor Stephen Pronai subsequently appointed First Assistant Greene County Prosecutor Suzanne Schmidt as a Special Prosecutor, and also Ethics Commission Chief Investigative Attorney Paul M. Nick as an Assistant Special Prosecutor to investigate and determine whether criminal charges were appropriate. The Commission's referral report was completed in March 2006. These charges were the result of plea negotiations with

James' attorney.

Special Prosecutor Schmidt said that while James was the only one of the three ousted board members to face criminal charges, all three underwent a detailed investigation by the Ohio Ethics Commission and the Special Prosecutors. The charges bring this investigation to an end, she added.

"I think it's a fair resolution," Nick said. "She accepted responsibility in criminal court for violating the public trust by using her public position to benefit family members. In addition, she is returning to the school district and taxpayers the money unlawfully paid to her daughter because of her wrongful acts."

The ethics conflict of interest charges were first degree misdemeanors, punishable by a maximum penalty of up to a \$1,000 fine and/or six months in jail. The Ethics Law protects the public from improper conflicts of interest by prohibiting public officials and employees from misusing their public positions or participating in actions to benefit family members, themselves, or their private business.

The Ohio Ethics Commission is an independent state agency that applies and administers the Ethics Law for state and local public officials and employees outside of the General Assembly and judiciary. The Commission was created 30 years ago upon the enactment of the Ohio Ethics Law in 1973.