



## The Voice of Ethics Podcast Transcript

### September 2025 Episode

### Happily Ever Grafter: When Weddings and Ethics Collide

Susan: Hello, ethical people, and welcome to the Voice of Ethics. I'm Susan Willeke of the Ohio Ethics Commission, and I am so excited to be launching this podcast, the show where we will dive into stories about ethics in government. Some stories will highlight admirable decision making and in other stories, well, let's just say we're going to get some examples of ethics gone awry. And to kick us off on this very first episode we're going to another example of new beginnings. \*Mendelssohn's Wedding March briefly plays\* You guessed it, weddings. Now, you might ask yourself, how on earth can weddings lend themselves to stories about ethics laws, right? Well, prepare to throw some rice because we've got some great stories for you today, and you don't even have to RSVP or even dress up.

So our first wedding ethics story takes us to a county career center. Some of you might know them as educational service centers. It's a resource that provides professional development and training for students in school districts. Things like cosmetology, vehicle maintenance repair programs, hospitality, hotel catering, really neat trades like that. Well, it's really common that career centers get rented for events, weddings, especially those that have a catering program for students there. So patrons can book the actual facility and have students cater those events as part of their training.

We had a superintendent that booked the facility at his own career center for his daughter's wedding, and all the normal fees would apply - building usage, custodial fees, food, gratuity, service charges and so on and so forth. The total for all of that for this wedding should have been close to \$4,800, just under \$5,000. Instead, the superintendent paid \$2,500. Now, was he allowed to use the facility just like anybody else in the community? Sure. We're not disputing that, that that's automatically prohibited under the Ethics Law, but I think both the law and common sense ought to indicate to us that he should have paid the same price as everyone else that uses that facility. Just kind of ask yourself, how would you feel if you heard about this in your community? That this public official is giving himself an almost 50% discount to use a public facility and public resources to benefit himself?

We can talk about the parts of the law implicated, conflicts of interest, gifts, I'm going to put in the show notes resources that will help guide you on parts of the law implicated, but still just ask yourself, would that help you trust that career center more or less? If that was in your community, you're paying taxes, would you trust them more or less? If your student, your child was a student there, how do you feel? This just illustrates why laws like this are so important to give boundaries to people in public service, but also to reassure you and me as taxpayers that governments ought to operate in certain ways.

Our next wedding story is about a city council person. Totally normal, by the way, that an elected official is going to have another job. Maybe they work here full time. Maybe they own their own business. Being an elected city council person is not going to pay the mortgage or build up a child's college fund, so totally normal there. That's not automatically illegal. So we have this particular city council person, and in addition to his role on the city council, he owns a DJ and photo service, things like weddings or other events.

First thing I would note here is that we do have resources on our website that clearly state that people in public service can never use their public role to obtain outside businesses, to get public contracts, to increase their client portfolio, to increase profits, and so on and so forth. I will actually put in the show

notes one of my favorite Advisory Opinions that outlines all these different things that we're talking about here.

So we have this city council person, not automatically illegal that in addition to his role on city council, he does weddings and outside events. The issue that came up here was that he has been active as an MC for various city events for some years, things like the Labor Day Festival, the Blues and Rib Fest, and so on and so forth. He also contracts with the local visitors bureau to provide those services through his outside business. What we encountered here is this council person, on two separate fiscal years, voting to approve the city budget, which included bed tax grant funds that were then disbursed to the Visitors Bureau and the Labor Day Festival. In those same two years, he was paid to MC the Rib Fest and the Labor Day Festival, was paid out of those visitor bureau's moneys after voting for that, that tax grant funds, that actually helps to fund those events.

Again, are we talking about an automatic prohibition that those two parts of his life can't exist? Not necessarily. But at minimum, recusal was required. Use whatever word you want. Abstain. Recuse. Withdraw. Step back. We are not allowed in public service to act on a matter in our official capacity that later benefits us financially, family wise, fiduciary and so on and so forth.

My third story takes us this time not to a council person, but to a mayor. Now for background and context here, it is absolutely normal and routine for mayors in Ohio to conduct weddings and to charge a fee. I'm guessing that's common in other states, but definitely in Ohio, this is completely routine and normal. What's not normal is those mayors not turning over those fees, those monies, to the city.

We had a mayor in Ohio that was in fact scheduling weddings, conducting weddings, collecting the fees, all those normal things. But instead of turning them over to the city was in fact pocketing the money for himself. To be fair, scheduling the wedding? No problem. Conducting the wedding? No problem. Collecting the fees for those wedding? No problem. Keeping the money for himself? This is where we have a big problem under the Ethics Law.

In fact, this is not that specific gift part of the Ethics Law that we talk about sometimes. This is what's called supplemental compensation. Somewhat self-explanatory there, I grant you, no one is allowed to supplement our compensation when we're in public service. Conducting weddings is part of a mayor's duty. Therefore, any weddings conducted - that's already covered by any compensation he or she receives. We are not allowed to ever augment that compensation. I will have in the show notes information about supplemental compensation as well.

Again, if you were to hear a story like that, how do you feel later about decisions that mayor makes? Are you going to be completely convinced that that mayor is objective in decision making, in moving forward on projects? Don't you see right there sort of a divided loyalty if I potentially have the opportunity to make more money out of the decisions and actions I make in my public role. That's, again, why laws like this exist, because you have the right to know that that's not how government operates.

My final story actually did not occur in Ohio. This is actually my favorite but most cringe worthy story. But I am relieved it did not happen in Ohio. So a few years ago, I was very excited that our niece was in the process of planning her wedding. So one day I'm on Facebook looking at all these different posts about wedding ideas and creative things you can do at your wedding, and I stumbled across a Facebook posting from someone that in Ohio we would maybe refer to it as a township fiscal clerk. So this township fiscal clerk is also looking for ideas and vendors for her own wedding. She posted on Facebook that she was looking for DJ services for her wedding.

Okay, so far so good. Here's where we run into problems. She put in this Facebook post that if there was a DJ out there willing to do DJ services for free at her wedding, that she would secure their services for all future township events that required a DJ, that as long as she was going to be in that public job, she'd make sure that DJ got all those public contracts.

She even went on to say, I attend conferences very often as part of my public job, and I will even advertise for you at public conferences on public time doing my public job.

Okay. I am happy to put into the show notes any fact sheets or parts of the statute that would be helpful to explain this. But here's my question. Does anybody really need a fact sheet to know that was a bad idea? Not just bad idea, illegal under the Law! We don't need a fact sheet to explain. Happy to, happy to include it, but I'm guessing just in your gut, viscerally, you can react to that and say, very bad idea under the Ethics Law.

So, hey, while weddings are wonderful, they are beautiful, still, be careful if you're in public service because weddings can come back to bite us, apparently, if we don't use some pretty good ethical decision making.

So, there you have it. Four stories on weddings as it implicates ethics. In sickness and in health, for better or for worse, we've come to the end of our first episode of The Voice of Ethics. Please join us in two weeks for our next episode, when we will celebrate the beginning of another school year with some stories that will take you back to the ethics classroom.

Until then, I leave you with this final nuptial story. Did you hear about the two cell phones that got married? The reception was excellent. Okay, everybody take care. Be ethical. Bye bye.