



The Voice of Ethics Podcast Transcript

October 2025 Episode

Take a Bow: Broadway and Bad Decisions

Susan: Hello ethical people. I'm Susan Willeke of the Ohio Ethics Commission, welcoming you to the Voice of Ethics, the podcast where we dive into stories about ethics in government. Some stories will make you chuckle, some will make you shake your head, but hopefully all of them will make you think. And this week we're heading upstage, downstage and even to the wings to say, break a leg because yes, we are heading to Broadway. *Give My Regards to Broadway musical excerpt* If you have ever visited the city that never sleeps, you may already know that fall is the season when new Broadway shows and musicals kick off. So we're gonna open the ethics playbill and do a critical review of some stories that will make you say, "Man, if only they'd had a dress rehearsal."

So our first Broadway story today takes us actually to a public pension board. These are folks that serve on boards to determine how public pension money is invested to make more money, and so on and so forth. We have five here in Ohio. So this particular public pension board, over the course of several years, had investment firms provide different, sort of, gifts to board members. Among the gifts that were provided were board arranged tour of investment properties in New York City, \$275 tickets for themselves (and in some cases for their spouses) for a New York City Broadway musical showing of the musical Hairspray, and all that accompanies that: multiple meals, entertainment, gifts. All told, the estimate was these gifts were valued at more than \$5,000 for these folks in public service.

Now, here's my personal critical review. If you are going to make a really poor decision under the Ethics Law about Broadway shows, maybe pick a better show than Hairspray. I'm just saying. Right? Okay, Les Mis I get. Wicked, I get. Hamilton? Sure, got it. Hairspray? Really? But I digress.

Let's talk about this for a second. We can certainly put in the show notes information about the Ethics Law that talks about not accepting substantial gifts from improper sources - all the people we do business with and that we regulate, and so on and so forth. It'll all be in the resources in the show notes. But let's just talk about this here for a minute. This whole idea of this ability that we humans sometimes have to make things okay if we're the ones doing it. My guess is most of us can look at someone else, even in this situation and say, "Heavens no, that's a horrible idea, that he or she did that." But somehow, and I confess, as a fellow human being, sometimes I am very quick to judge in you what I'm very quick to forgive in myself.

So here's what I wanna ask everybody to do. In your years of public service, I get that most of us are probably not going to be front in line for being offered tickets to Broadway shows on a private jet to New York City. I get that. Believe me, if you're in the non-wined and dined category of people in public service, please trust that I can not only sympathize, but I empathize. I work for the Ohio Ethics Commission. People send remarkably few presents to the Ohio Ethics Commission, so I get it. But when those moments do come up - "Hey, I've got an extra ticket to an OSU football game." "I've got an extra person I need in the foursome for the golf outing." I'm not suggesting that every gift need be looked at with horror, but I would say in public service we have to be careful under this law of what we accept.

Reach out to us. Look at the, the fact sheets, look at the Advisory Opinions that we provide through our website. Wade through those. If you still can't find what you need to know, give us a call. But in general,

just assume those kind of high dollar things from all these companies we work with and regulate and so forth, are simply off limits to us under the Ethics Law.

Our next story actually takes us to New England, a beautiful state in fact, the state of Massachusetts. My counterpart in that state, the person who oversees public speaking and training and so on, is a gentleman named Gerry Tuoti. Really good guy, and he has some pretty cool stories that he has shared with me over the years. And when I found out that Gerry had a Broadway story, I thought "We cannot miss this one." So for the next minute or two, I am going to turn the mic over to my buddy Gerry Tuoti from the State of Massachusetts Ethics Commission.

Gerry: The school was donated tickets to Hamilton by a local nonprofit organization. The intention of the donation was that the school would be able to bring underprivileged kids, who normally would not have the chance to see a Broadway style show. The assistant principal and principal decided that they would chaperon the trips. That opportunity was not provided to any of the other teachers or staff members of the school, and that they would also pick which students went to the show.

So they picked a limited number of students. But then in addition to that, they used a couple of the tickets to bring their own children to the show. And their own children were not students at the school or even in the school district.

Susan: All right, let's talk everybody. I grant you, there are some musicals that end really happy, aren't there? Oklahoma, The Music Man, even the aforementioned Hairspray, Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat, even Legally Blonde. These are all happy endings. Some end sad, don't they? Les Mis, goodness, Hamilton end sad, right? But some seem to end in a way that's just downright wrong, right?

This story started in a such a heartwarming way, didn't it? That this booster club, they want to raise money to give tickets to the school district for this amazing opportunity for kids to see Hamilton. If you've never seen the musical, by the way, Hamilton, it's marvelous. I thoroughly enjoy it and I would be excited for kids to get the chance to go see this traveling Broadway musical and see it in real life. What a kind gesture for this booster club that they raised this money and specifically earmark it for kids who may not otherwise have this opportunity. Maybe their moms and dads have faced economically challenging times. Maybe this is just not part of their life experience. What a neat opportunity that would have been had these folks and public service not have taken advantage of the opportunity to make sure they and their families got to enjoy that show.

And the icing on the cake here is that these families didn't even live in the school district. *Vesti la giubba musical excerpt* What a travesty. What an unfortunate statement for how that school district operated and how sometimes we make decisions as people in public service.

So here's what I'd say. Maybe this ending wasn't as tragic as one like West Side Story, but it's not the ending we want. When faced with a gift question, how to proceed - call us. Look at our website. We'd be thrilled to help.

And our final Broadway situation here is actually a question that was posed to us that I think is a very fair question, perfectly valid that this comes up. And here was the question. Someone came to the Ethics Commission, said, "Am I allowed to purchase two tickets to a traveling Broadway musical from a vendor that works with my agency?" I think this is very fair.

So we have this situation where I work for XYZ Public Agency and they work with this consultant, this vendor, maybe they sell computer equipment, construction services, whatever, to that public agency, and

that vendor says "We have two tickets that we can't use." Maybe they normally go to an employee and a spouse, maybe they normally go to one of their clients and they say, "We can't use this."

Now, the first question is, would I be allowed to take these tickets for free from the agency vendor? And the answer is absolutely not. That would be a substantial thing of value from an improper source. You can read all about that in the information in our show notes.

But in this case the person said, "May I buy them?" The vendor would not be gifting them. And the Ethics Commission responded saying, yes, that is possible for that public employee, that public official, when offered the chance to purchase that ticket, in fairness to a sporting event, concert or in this case, a Broadway show, since that's our theme this week, it is possible for that public official employee to purchase that ticket as long as, everybody will say to me, "Well, Susan, as long as they're paying face value," yes, that could be it, or if that vendor paid a higher amount, maybe they got it from a ticket broker, that person would have to pay that higher amount. Whether it's face value or higher if it cost that vendor more than face value to purchase that ticket.

Okay. This is a curtain call, everybody. *crowd clapping sound effect* I hope you enjoyed this episode of The Voice of Ethics. Or maybe this week we should call it the Sound of Ethics maybe? Where's Julie Andrews when you need her?

Anyway, if this week's show just wasn't enough drama for you tune in again in two weeks when we'll take a walk on the spooky side of the street to talk about ethics and cemeteries. BOO! Until then, I leave you with my own Broadway failure. Did you know I once wrote a musical about pizza? Everybody said it was too cheesy. *crowd jeering sound effect* Take care everybody. Be ethical. Bye.