



## The Voice of Ethics Podcast Transcript

### November 2025 Episode

### Thanksgiving Travel and Other Bad Ideas

Susan: Hello ethical people. I'm Susan Willeke of the Ohio Ethics Commission, welcoming you to the Voice of Ethics, the show where we dive into stories about ethics in government. On this podcast, we have stories that can make you chuckle, some that will make you roll your eyes and some that will probably cause you to say, "Are you serious, Ethics Lady?" To which I always respond, "Hey, I don't have to be creative and inventive in this job. I get stories for free all the time!"

But most of all, I hope the stories we share will make you want to know more about the law, and even check out our website to gobble up more info. \*turkey gobble sound effect\* Because, yes, this is the time of year to gobble gobble up your favorite side dishes. Because let's be honest, sweet potatoes and stuffing are way more exciting than turkey. This is when we visit with our family, we watch the Macy's Day Parade, we look forward to leftovers for the rest of the weekend - yes, it's Thanksgiving week. The holiday season has begun.

And I think the most important thing we can do this week, of course, is be thankful. My deepest appreciation to all of you for your public service, for all you do to make Ohio and your communities a great place to call home. And most importantly, thank you for tuning in to this podcast. This week I have two stories that mentally take me to this time of year. Our first story takes us to an Ohio township, and some of the traveling that some of you might be embarking on during the holiday season.

The first story is about a township trustee who had one of those, you know, hotel chain Visa cards, you know what I mean? They have a credit card and you earn points, you enroll in their company reward program and so forth. So, this township trustee has one of those Visa cards. Fine.

While on township business and different out of town meetings, conferences, seminars, he would use his hotel Visa card to pay not just for his hotel room and meals while at the conference, he would pay for every employee in the township who was also attending that conference.

So, for example, let's say five of them were going to this conference in Columbus for the Ohio Township Association annual conference. He insisted that nobody book for or pay for their rooms, or even pick up the tab for their own meals and then later be reimbursed by the township. Instead, he insisted, I will pay for all of the hotel rooms. I will pay for all of the meals, etc.. My recollection is there might have even been a flight or two in there somewhere for other people when attending these different types of conferences and seminars.

Well, long story short, the trustee received significant points in that hotel chains reward program, as you can expect, and he ended up using some of those reward points for a three night vacation for himself and his wife.

Okay. Now, in all fairness, the Ohio Ethics Commission did issue an Advisory Opinion just this year about reward points, even frequent flier miles, right? In the past, the Ethics Commission had restricted the use of things like frequent flier miles. So if, in fact, someone in public service goes on airlines and goes to trips, that's a normal part of their job, and they would accrue you know, those reward points or frequent flier miles as a normal part of their travel. In the past, the Commission had restricted the use for personal use.

This most recent Advisory Opinion is 2025-02, did lift some of those restrictions. This Advisory Opinion stated that public officials and employees can use those frequent flier miles and reward points that were earned during official travel for their own personal travel. As long as, you know, all those frequent flier miles, the reward points, they were earned under the same conditions as anybody else, right? This was the normal reward program, normal frequent flier program that this airline provides. There was no sort of special deal for them. That was a normal program.

And the other caveat was you can't use those points or frequent flier miles if, when you booked the airfare, when you booked that hotel, that you deliberately booked something that would be more expensive to your agency in order to get more reward points.

So I will say that this opinion still would take issue with what that township trustee did. Because, if you note, I said he didn't just use that hotel chain Visa card for his own travel, he did it for everyone else in that office. And this opinion specifically noted that that's not okay, right? We can't book for numerous people. So if I'm a planner, if I'm the administrative assistant who books those trips, they can't book a whole bunch of people and then say, "Hey, I'm going to use all those frequent flier miles or reward points" from, let's say, one event.

You know, this is a good Advisory Opinion. I like that the Ethics Commission is always thinking of, how do we make sure that we are always in compliance with the law, but still being aware of some of the updates to things like frequent flier programs? You can find that Advisory Opinion in our show notes for this episode.

The other story I wanted to share with you was a story that was posed to me at one of my speeches many years ago. There was never an Advisory Opinion, there was no investigation, this was just one of those head scratching, anecdotal things that came up during one of my speeches.

So, this county commissioner in a certain county in Ohio comes to his office on that Monday of Thanksgiving week. And lo and behold, sitting on his desk is a huge turkey. \*turkey call sound effect\* Perhaps I should clarify a frozen turkey, not one that was walking around on his desk gobbling things. Right?

So there is this very big frozen turkey on his desk. There is a Thanksgiving greeting card that says, "Happy Thanksgiving from You Know Who." And the Commissioner insisted to me over and over, he had no idea who "You Know Who" was.

So he didn't know what to do with it. He really was legitimately thinking to himself, "Is this from somebody in the county that we are regulating? Is it from one of our vendors? Is it from somebody trying to get a zoning variance? Somebody trying to get that public," I don't know, "construction contract?" Right?

So he was legitimately thinking, how do I handle this appropriately? Because he told me at the speech, "Normally I would send the gift back if I was uncomfortable accepting it, but didn't know who 'You Know Who' is." So he ended up donating it to a food bank. I think that's a pretty good solution to a conundrum that he wasn't sure how to process.

Back to that township trustee, just so you know, there was mitigation for that story as well. The trustee ended up donating his hotel reward points, about 75,000 points to a charity that the Ethics Commission approved in advance. And his township later passed a resolution that all future expenses would be placed on a township credit card, not a personal one.

Now, I grant you, you may read this Advisory Opinion and you may have more questions and that's wonderful. We're thrilled when that happens. But just remember, there is so much on our website that could have helped some of these folks know what to do and not to do.

So that's our podcast for this week. I hope you enjoyed gobbling it all up. \*turkey sound effect\* Just know that I wish you all a safe, joyful, and peaceful Thanksgiving week and hope that you'll join me in two weeks when we'll talk about the ethical challenges that can accompany holiday shopping. You won't want to miss it.

In the meantime, let's wrap up this episode by asking ourselves what movie best describes Thanksgiving morning. And of course, the answer is: The Hunger Games. Take care everybody. Be ethical and Happy Thanksgiving. Bye.