



## The Voice of Ethics Podcast Transcript

### December 2025 Episode

### The 12 NBA Tickets of Christmas (and Other Illegal Gifts)

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. I sometimes tell you disturbing stories, sometimes I tell you eye-rolling stories. But this week, my holiday gift to you is some of my favorite crazy gift stories in all of government. These stories should make you chuckle, but hopefully also make you crazy aware that people in government accepting substantial gifts from certain people and entities is a good reason to get your tinsel in a tangle.

\*Jingle Bells music\* So pull on your fuzzy holiday socks and pour yourself an eggnog. Nonalcoholic, if you're listening to this podcast at work, mind you. Or maybe you're listening as a group while at your office holiday party. The thing I love about office holiday parties is that they're a great chance to catch up with people whom you haven't seen in 20 minutes or so. But anyway, enjoy this special holiday edition of The Voice of Ethics.

My first crazy gift story takes us to a metropolitan housing authority. Shout out to all of those county entities that provide housing options for people who are facing some challenging economic situations. They do great work, but every once in a while we might get a story where someone makes a bad decision.

So here we have a director of one of those housing authorities who interacts with vendors as a normal part of her job. The problem here was accepting these extravagant gifts from a vendor doing business with that agency. Specifically, the gifts I want to talk about today are tickets to NBA games. You got it. Over the course of about two and a half years, this director accepted 12 different tickets to professional basketball games. Combined value of those tickets were just over \$1,700. Now, in fairness, this particular vendor was not one that she interacted with personally, but she did participate in the committee that makes recommendations to continue that vendor's services.

I hope this kind of goes without saying that when we have vendors or potential vendors working with our agencies, accepting tickets and different expensive gifts like that are simply a bad idea. Glad you come to the ethics trainings and the ethics podcast to learn more, so we know what not to do in situations like that. So no throwing shade on the NBA or those of you who love basketball. But please, if you're going to go to a game this holiday season, buy your own ticket.

All right. Our next story takes us to our neighbor, Pennsylvania. I would like to introduce you to Mary Fox, who is the executive director of the Pennsylvania Ethics Commission. Mary has a story that starts with a broken bridge and somehow ends up in jolly old England. Mary, take it away.

Mary: And so they built this bridge late 1800s. The bridge in the 1990s was starting to have some real serious structural issues. They had stopped running trains across it, so it was really only open to pedestrian traffic. And there was one particular employee within Department of Conservation and Natural Resources who was responsible for making sure that the bridge was structurally sound and the upgrades were done properly.

So he's going out and he's making these quick purchases for construction, for contractors to do the work, and the engineers he was working with advise that one of the things they needed to do was purchase an

epoxy coating that would go over some of the rusted areas of the bridge. He went actually directly to a company, made a direct purchase as an emergency procurement of this epoxy coating from a company located in England.

And the workers are trying to put this epoxy coating over the metal, and it isn't adhering because of issues involving the epoxy itself and then also humidity, temperature, things like that. And so the workers keep on saying "We have problems! We have problems! We have problems! This isn't going on right!" And our guy at the Department of Conservation Natural Resources just keeps pooh-poohing them and he's ignoring it and he's not doing anything about it.

And the reason he wasn't doing anything about it was because, right when these issues were being raised to him, he had accepted an all expenses paid trip to England along with his wife, ostensibly to tour the factory where they were manufacturing the epoxy. But of course he never toured the factory, never went to the factory at all, and instead he went sightseeing in England. I think he may have done some golfing.

So while he's in England, and he's just on this personal vacation paid for by the epoxy company and ignoring all the the issues with this company, it just so happens that a storm comes through and a giant tornado comes down through the valley, and it knocks down the bridge, or at least half the bridge. And so I just can't imagine him hearing that this bridge had been knocked down while he was over in England on this vacation.

Susan: Okay, partially, I love that story. Just because how else do you end up in England because you're an engineer working for the Department of Transportation, right? But also, I have to admit, when I think of Christmas and England, Charles Dickens comes right to mind. So while he was in England, I hope at least he met up with the Ghost of Christmas Future that says, don't ever take a trip or a gift like this again. \*Man saying Bah humbug sound effect\* There you go, all right?

We're coming home to Ohio for our next story. Believe it or not, this next crazy gift story takes us to the lottery. We had a gentleman who worked for the Lottery Commission, but prior to his employment with the Lottery Commission, was a very enthusiastic gambler.

To his credit, he had stopped playing at those video lottery terminal machines when he got the job with the Lottery Commission, because that's required by the terms of that job, that you cannot actively gamble and spend time with those video lottery terminal machines if you're going to work at the Lottery Commission. And he did so, to his credit.

Here's the problem, though. When he stopped playing, as he was supposed to do, those companies noticed his absence and began sending him promotions for free play at those lottery terminal machines as well as free food vouchers. Apparently, that is not uncommon for those companies that operate these video lottery machines to do that when their players stop frequenting their facilities. So they started sending him these free play vouchers and free food vouchers.

All in all, he received just over \$500 in free vouchers, and he redeemed just over \$400 worth of food. Now, I confess I don't know what food costs at those kind of places, but I got to say \$400 worth of artery clogging food wasn't a good idea even if it wasn't a violation of the Ohio Ethics Law.

So I like that story because we previously in the last story talked about people, vendors, etc. that we do business with. In this story, you see, that those whom we regulate in public service are also improper sources of those expensive, substantial gifts.

I saved my favorite story for last because this story not only takes us out of Ohio, it takes us to one of the most beautiful states that the United States has, the Aloha State, Hawaii. I would like to introduce you to Kee Campbell, who is the enforcement director for the Hawaii Ethics Commission.

Kee shared with me a really cool story about a gift violation in his state, which I grant you would be illegal in Ohio, but probably a lot less likely to occur here in Ohio. You'll know what I'm talking about after you hear this story. Kee, take it away.

Kee: What you had was a harbor agent and the harbor agent in Hawaii, in our harbors is basically in charge of regulating, you know, the use of business, any sort of licensing of businesses in the harbors. So it's kind of a big deal to be a harbor agent there. Also they give input in terms of who's allowed to operate in the harbor.

So then that person, accepted free parasailing rides, but he did it in an interesting way. So he told the parasailing company that operates in the harbor, "Hey, look, I want to go parasailing," from his state email account using his state signature tag. Then the parasailing company was saying, "Hey! Well, actually, we'll give you free parasailing for you, your friend, and then three minors." And then he responded, "Okay, that sounds great," also from his state email account, "and I'll be sure to sort of make it worth your while" or kick backs and specialties or something. So obviously raises a lot of issues under our laws.

Susan: You see what I mean now? I don't think that story is going to keep you awake at night is it? Are you really, really worried about free parasailing in Ohio? I mean, maybe maybe so, maybe Lake Erie has all kinds of free parasailing available. I don't know.

But you get the point. When we are overseeing projects, when we regulate, when we work with vendors, when there's people with vested interests and matters before our public agency, we can not accept these kind of substantial things of value that we've heard about on this episode. Please check out the show notes for some of our most popular gift resources, both in terms of fact sheets and Advisory Opinions.

And so this episode is ho-ho-hover for this week. Thank you so much for joining me this week, and a special thank you for those of you who have listened to each episode since we launched this podcast in September. I love hearing from you all, and I hope that you will email me if you have ideas for 2026 - maybe stories you want to share, things you want to hear more about, or if you want to help me improve the quality of the jokes that I end each show with.

So yes, we'll be back next year. Yikes, that sounds like forever. But no, I'll actually be back in two weeks to kick off the New Year with my two all time favorite ethics stories. And, just a teaser, one of those stories involves, believe it or not, bourbon. What a way to kick off 2026, am I right? You will not want to miss it.

Until then, on behalf of the entire Ohio Ethics Commission. I wish you Hanukkah sameach! Merry Christmas! And Happy New Year. I hope your holiday season is filled with family, friends, joy, peace, and laughter. And speaking of laughter, do you know how much Santa paid for his sleigh? Nothing. It was on the house. \*Santa jolly laughter sound effect\* Take care everyone. Be ethical and I'll see you in 2026. Bye bye.