



The Voice of Ethics Podcast Transcript

April 2026 Episode

Smooth Asphalt, Slippery Ethics

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. And today, to begin our episode, I want to encourage you to click your heels together three times and repeat to yourself that famous quote from Dorothy Gale, "There's no place like home. There's no place like home. There's no place like home."

sigh Home. They say it's where the heart is, right? So join me in taking a deep breath and thinking about that specific spot in your home where you feel the most joy, the most relaxed, the spot where you are the best version of "you."

Did you choose your patio? Maybe a sofa where you loved to sit and read? Or perhaps your kitchen because it's where the people you love most gather for sustenance and laughter. Or maybe you chose your driveway! *record scratch sound effect* Wait, what? Driveway?

Yep, you heard me correctly. On today's episode, we are going to talk about a driveway. This story makes me chuckle because normally driveways are one of the most boring parts of your home, you know?

I mean, I remember when my husband and I remodeled our kitchen and we loved having people over to "ooh" and "ahh" over it. Or in the summertime when you finish that big landscaping project and it's so much fun to share that beautiful space with your friends and neighbors. But who invites people to come over and admire a newly paved driveway? Nobody. But nonetheless, the driveway is the part of the home that we're going to focus on today. So grab your tar and your wheelbarrow we're heading outside for a deal that could have been paid in pavement.

This story comes to us from a township administrator who was home minding his own business when an asphalt company representative paid him a fairly assertive visit.

The township administrator called me at work a few days after this situation occurred, and I immediately begged him to let me turn it into a podcast episode eventually. So while I'm not providing his name or the name of the township he represents, I think you'll enjoy his story. So, anonymous township administrator, take it away.

Township Administrator: So it was last summer when it was, hot out and all the neighbors decided to, their driveways needed replaced.

So I noticed it started at the end of the block. Someone did their driveway, and then next thing you know another neighbor does their driveway and so I'm like, what's going on here? Is this pre-planned? Well, what was happening was the contractor was going door to door and basically selling the jobs as he was moving down the block.

And so probably about 5 or 6 houses were done before I get a knock on the door from a contractor of the paving company saying, "Hey, I, your neighbors are telling me that you're somebody that could be able to

help my job here. I understand your township does a lot of paving every summer." Well, yeah, our township budget's about a million and a half dollars from road levy funds so I said, "Yeah, we do."

And he's like, "Well, I would love to show you what I could do and do your driveway if you need it."

I'm like, "Well, I don't need it done. I don't, I really am not planning on it at this time."

He was like, "Well no, no, listen, I really, I, you know, you don't have to worry about it because I plan to do this, you know, just to show you what I can do."

I'm like, "What do you mean?"

He says, "I'll do this for free."

I'm like, "Whoa, buddy, no, I don't want you to do that." I says, "I can't do that. That would be very, very bad. I'm not allowed by ethical nature to do this."

And so he says, "Oh, you are you sure?"

I'm like, "Yeah, I'm sure."

And so he stops back later when I go back to work and starts bugging my wife about, "Hey, you want your driveway done? I talked to your husband. He was hedging."

And so my wife calls me and says, "Hey, this guy came back and kind of pressuring, wants us to have our driveway done." She says, "How much is this going to cost?"

I said, "Well, they want to do it for free."

And she's like, "Oh really?"

I'm like "Yeah." I'm like, "I'm not doing this."

I finally say, "No, quit calling. I can't do this." And I said, "I am NOT interested."

And finally he gets finished on my block and moves on. So that was the last I heard of him.

So I thought it was kind of funny. I thought, I've heard of other people taking bribes from people to do work, but I didn't really want to be part of that.

Susan: Do you know how the contractor knew you were the township administrator?

Township Administrator: My neighbors told him!

Susan: Nice.

Township Administrator: Yeah. So they ratted me out. You know, usually, usually I'm incognito. Nobody knows what I'm doing. But some of them, one of the ones that was getting their job done thought he would do me a favor. Because, you know, my, at the time, my driveway wasn't looking very good, and I seal it myself every year.

And so I ended up actually paying for a nice concrete driveway. So that kind of took care of the issue.

Susan: Good for you. What prompted you - I should tell listeners listening to this episode that it was actually this administrator that I'm talking to that reached out to us. What prompted you to give us a call and let us know about this situation/story?

Township Administrator: Well, gee, as soon as it happens, I was thinking of you because you're the state guru of ethics. *Susan laughs loudly* You know, when everyone says, have you ever heard a good lecture on ethics? I says, "Oh, yeah, that's Susan. She does a great job." I mean, that's all I hear.

Susan: Yeah, speaking of not being able to be anonymous in public, I have to tell you. *both laugh*

Township Administrator: So, you know, I thought immediately because, I've been doing public service now 29 years, and I've heard your lecture, and I find your lectures refreshing and,

Susan: Thank you

Township Administrator: it's very informative. And the case studies that you go over are very interesting because they're humorous sometimes, you know, just hearing, "Really? They really did that??"

And I just didn't want to be one of those ones that, you know, are on the want list by the state people. So I thought I should mention this to the guru of state ethics.

Susan: Nice to be on the right side of the law isn't it?

Township Administrator: It is!

Susan: So you've been in a township administrative for a while now,

Township Administrator: 21 years here.

Township Administrator: Yeah. So obviously you don't want to get in trouble under any criminal law. That's kind of a given, one would think. But on a more, I don't know, existential, higher level why do you think stories like this matter? Why it was important - not just because you don't want to get busted for a crime - why it was important for you to say "No, I can't do that"?

Township Administrator: Well, obviously, I have a conscience, and I just. I didn't want to worry every day about potentially someone showing up at a trustee meeting saying, "Hey, this guy, he, you know, he had this done for free and no one else on the block had a free job done." Because, you know, that's not right.

And I don't want to jeopardize and I don't want to - I want to sleep at night and not worry about someone threatening me with, "Oh, I had, I did your job for free. So now I want the business." I didn't want to be stuck in a position where I'm coerced into doing something that I don't want to do.

Susan: Yeah, yeah. And it preserves the public's trust. Not just in you, but in the whole township to know that the township is operating ethically with the public's best interest in mind.

Of course I'm so glad this story has a good ending. The township administrator did the right thing and even let us know about it. I do want to note quickly his reference to bribes. Now hear me say this - bribes are bad. Don't take them. Don't offer them. Period.

But it's important to note that if the administrator had accepted the driveway, it would be illegal even if that driveway gift didn't influence him. It didn't change some outcome or convince him to give the asphalt company the township's business. Merely accepting such a substantial gift from a potential vendor would be prohibited under the Ohio Ethics Law.

If you want to read more about gift restrictions under the Law, please check out our show notes for additional information.

And if you're wondering what happened after the township administrator called me here, as they say, is the rest of the story. The one detail that the township administrator didn't mention during the recorded conversation I just played is that the company representative gave him a business card. Of course it had his name and his contact information on it.

So after he and I initially talked last summer, I spoke with our deputy counsel and chief investigative attorney.

And you might ask, "Susan, why would you elevate the situation? The township administrator did exactly the right thing." And yes, he did.

Here's the issue, though. Just as the Ethics Law prohibits those of us in public service from accepting those substantial gifts from improper sources, the Law equally forbids the private sector from promising, offering or giving substantial things of value to people in public service in situations when that private sector company or person is regulated by that public entity, maybe they're interested in matters before that public office or doing or even seeking to do business with that public office.

Bingo. This company rep clearly communicated that he knew who the township administrator was. Knew that the administrator controlled the paving budget for the township and indisputably offered him a substantial thing of value, a free driveway, and then encouraged him to give him the township's business.

That is the trifecta of gift violation awareness.

Since we now had this allegation from the administrator, our investigative unit issued a confidential notice of potential violation, which essentially notes that we're aware they did this, instructs them not to do it again, and warns them that if it happens again, we will open a more formal criminal investigation. It's a way to educate someone so they don't repeat that behavior in the future.

I know I would definitely choke on my coffee if I got that letter in the mail from the Ethics Commission. And while I don't want that company rep to choke on anything, I do think he ought to chew on the restrictions in the Ethics Law and revise his behavior accordingly.

So that's our episode for this week. Even though I'm not identifying our guest today, you know who you are. And I just want to say, "Dude, when it comes to ethics, you kick asphalt." *slow clap leads to full crowd applause sound effect*

Thank you to the Ohio Ethics Commission Education and Communications Specialist Nick Rohrbaugh for all the podcast work he does behind the scenes. And always, thank you for joining us for another episode of The Voice of Ethics.

Join us again in two weeks for another look at ethics sometimes done well, and some situations that pave the way for wrongdoing.

And before I let you go, I must ask: what did the man carrying a chunk of concrete say when he walked into a bar?

I'll take one for me and one for the road. *rimshot sound effect*

Take care everyone. Be ethical. Bye.