



The Voice of Ethics Podcast Transcript

November 2025 Episode

Fall Into Woodchipper Crime

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 of those stories make me proud. Some make me wince and some make me want to put on a flannel shirt and head outside. *footsteps in crunching leaves sound effect* One of the things I love about Ohio is that we really get to experience all four seasons very distinctly, don't we? It is so easy to picture in our brains the sights and the sounds and smells of each season and, in my never to be humble opinion, fall is Ohio's best season of all.

Yeah, I know it's November and the leaves are pretty much history by now, but this is the time of year with bonfires and apple cider and sweaters and candles, hot chocolate...ooh, and my most favorite one of all, everybody: pumpkin. Pumpkin anything! Pumpkin pie. Pumpkin cookies, muffins, pancakes, lattes - you name it! If we didn't have to limit our podcast time, I could go on and on, like, remember Bubba in Forrest Gump talking about all the dishes you can make with shrimp? Shrimp and pumpkin risotto...I might have to think about that one. Anyway, I digress.

You may know this already, but another benefit of autumn is that it's generally a great time of year to work on your landscaping. You surprised? In fairness, I know most of us associate spring with working in the yard, but the truth is, fall is an excellent time to work on some of those outdoor projects. I just read an article that mulching in the fall has several benefits. It insulates the plant roots for upcoming winter temperatures, retains soil moisture, suppresses weeds, all those things that help our plants survive the winter.

So, what does all this have to do with the Ethics Law? I'm glad you asked. When you take down dead or dying trees during your outdoor sprucing this fall, you have a couple options on what to do with that wood. I admit, s'mores over a crackling bonfire sounds like a great idea, *crackling fire sound effect* but you could also make your own mulch this year. And what do you need for that? *woodchipper pull start sound effect* You got it. A woodchipper. And believe it or not, we have not one but two woodchipper stories for this week.

Our first story takes us all the way to British Columbia, Canada. Speaking of cold temperatures, right? Well, the former speaker of the Legislative Assembly in British Columbia, which I will abbreviate as B.C. from now on, if that's okay, he was appointed in 2017 as the speaker of their Legislative Assembly. Shortly after being appointed the speaker became concerned about some financial, let's say, irregularities that he was hearing about and noticing involving two senior administrators of the B.C. legislature. One was the House clerk and the other one was the Sergeant-at Arms.

He had been hearing these stories circulating around legislative offices about purchases all being billed back to the Legislative Assembly. He heard everything from things like art, expensive luggage, expensive like, business suits, and...you ready for the drumroll? Here's the kicker. A wood splitter and trailer. This gentleman had heard these stories that these weren't necessarily things the Legislative Assembly was using - the luggage or the suits or certainly the wood splitter. So he really debated it, talked to some trusted folks and ended up reporting this matter and several different investigations ensued.

One of those investigations resulted in this external administrative report that was issued by a former B.C. Supreme Court justice. That report determined that the House clerk's actions amounted to what they called "professional misconduct" in several areas. Then there was a subsequent external investigation that found that Sergeant-at Arms had lied during one of the investigations and that, as they put it, he further neglected his duties as outlined by what they called the Police Act in their province. He was shown a copy of this report a few days before its public release, and when he read what was about to become public record, he ended up resigning.

A few years later, in 2022, a B.C. Supreme Court judge sentenced the former house clerk to a month of house arrest, two months of curfew for what they called a "breach of public trust" and then repayment for some of those misexpenditures. The curfew one was interesting to me. If that exists in Ohio I confess I'm not familiar with it. Some of my listeners out there may be very familiar with it. That's great. But that was one that was kind of new to me that we could have a curfew as part of our punishment.

Now, very often when I'm talking about some of these stories, I then refer you to our show notes and say, "Hey, look at this Advisory Opinion. Look at this fact sheet." The truth is, I was chatting with our chief advisory attorney about this issue and we both kind of came to the conclusion we didn't have a whole lot to put in the show notes on this one. Because, if that had happened in Ohio, my assumption would be that would end up being more of a theft in office issue.

If we get an allegation like that, we then end up referring that to the local prosecutor for theft in office. But I still wanted to include it in this podcast one, because how do you pass up a woodchipper or wood splitter story that talks about people using this kind of public expenditure for these things that they end up taking home with them - really bad idea all the way around.

But I think it also points to, sometimes there are people in public service that are going to make bad decisions even in the face of all advice. There are those folks. I will confess to you, in my 20 years talking about the Ohio Ethics Law, I have had to conclude that there are some folks that I probably am not going to direct most of my trainings and e-courses and webinars and speeches to, because the truth is, if someone's already made a decision they're going to act a certain way, I don't know that my training is going to change their mind.

Where I believe training and education and factsheets and Advisory Opinions can be so helpful are for good, hardworking public employees and officials like you and like me, that want to do the right thing, that just needs some information to help guide us, and it's our great honor to do that. I don't know that those two guys in British Columbia would have been open to training and advice, but if you are open to that, please reach out to us, check out our website. We'd be thrilled to help you in any way we can.

Our second story about woodchippers takes us right back here to Ohio. This was a township trustee who, like many, many elected officials, in addition to his public service, had a job in his private life. Really normal in Ohio. We've talked about that in past episodes. So the township was, in fact, legitimately looking into purchasing a woodchipper for use by the actual township. This could be to clear trees that had fallen during storms, dead trees at public parks, and so on and so forth. A legitimate use of public money, I'm sure.

This particular township trustee, however, in addition to his public service actually works for a company that, you got it, sells woodchippers. Had he called us when this conversation began and said, "Hey, Ethics Commission, my township, where I serve as trustee, is researching woodchippers. Where can they buy them from? How much can they cost? What should they do? And they know that I work for a company that sells just such equipment. How should I proceed?" We would have been well situated, prior to him acting on anything, to guide him.

You can't discuss it. You can't give recommendations. You can't research it. You can't participate. You can't vote. You can't advocate, lobby and so on and so forth.

Instead, none of that happened. He didn't ask us those questions. He went ahead and did the research. Put together proposals. He facilitated conversations. He weighed in and then eventually voted on the purchase of that woodchipper by the township from the very company that employs him. And then, after it was voted on, later signed the purchase order.

Here's the thing. I totally recognize this gentleman didn't receive additional compensation. He was correct in saying woodchippers can be high in demand. They could be hard to find. But at the end of the day, in public service, we're not allowed to act on those matters that help ourselves, our families, or even our private business associates - in this case, his private employer.

You can read all about this. I am going to put in the show notes for this story, information about public contracts and how we need to proceed with caution in public service if it does impact some outside business associate of ours. But read it, check out our website, let us know if you ever need more specific guidance or advice in this area of the law.

So that's it for this week. I hope this episode has inspired you to maybe jump into a pile of leaves, or perhaps tailgate at a football game, or even cook a big pot of pumpkin chili. Don't knock until you try it, people, right?

But most of all, I hope we've encouraged you to check out our website. Do the right thing and join us again in two weeks, when we will load up the back of the station wagon with Charlie Brown and the gang to head to grandmother's house for Thanksgiving.

Until then, I leave you with this observation that our investigators here at the Ethics Commission have noticed. Throughout the history of the Ethics Commission, our investigators have noted that apples, one of the best produce results of autumn growing are bad in investigative interrogations. Do you know why? They always crumble. Sorry, everybody. All right. Take care. Be ethical. Bye bye.