



## The Voice of Ethics Podcast Transcript

### June 2026 Episode

### Take Me Out to the Ballgame

**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!

This episode is airing in the beautiful month of June, so we thought long and hard about what's fun, what's all-American in the month of June. To give you a hint, I quote the late President Theodore Roosevelt who wisely noted that "You can't hit a home run unless you step up to the plate."

And if that hint wasn't overt enough, how about the fictional Coach Jimmy Dugan who famously and repeatedly declared that "There's no crying in baseball!" Ah gosh, wasn't *A League of Their Own* a fabulous movie? I love that one!

Well, I suspect by now that you know that we're going to be talking about ethics and baseball in this episode. No, we are not going to delve into stories about Shoeless Joe Jackson and the 1919 Black Sox – although, I have to tell you, I think the real scandal there is why ANYONE would go barefoot in a public ballpark! Ew! Yick! Gross! Blech!

No, instead, we're heading to the Windy City – yep, Chicago! Now, to be fair, the Chicago Cubs did nothing wrong in the story you're about to hear today, so if you are a Cubs fan, relax, we are not going to throw shade at your beloved Cubbies!

Instead, we're going straight to Chi-Town to find out what happened when some elected officials were told they could no longer get the sweet deal of face value tickets to the World Series when that behind-the-scenes-bargain was *hardly* available to anybody else in the general baseball-loving public! I am so excited to play for you today a delightful conversation I had with one of my favorite ethics pals who had a front row seat – not to the World Series, but to a World Series ethics issue!

So, grab a hot dog or some peanuts and Cracker Jack and enjoy!

*\*Take Me Out to the Ballgame musical excerpt\**

**Susan:**

So I have a really special guest with me today on the podcast, partly because I have such respect for him, for his experience, his wisdom, his knowledge and love of Ethics Laws, but also because we've been pals for 20 years now. It's really my pleasure to introduce Steve Berlin. Steve, hi, welcome!

**Steve:**

Thank you, Susan, and thank you for your kind words and your introduction.

**Susan:**

Well, Steve has been, in addition to being my ethics friend for the last two decades, Steve has been the longtime executive director of the Chicago Board of Ethics. Steve, you're in your 33rd year. Is that right?

**Steve:**

Yes. It'll be 33 complete years as of August 31st of this year.

**Susan:**

Wow! So, Steve, you and I were chatting once. So the reason everybody, the reason Steve and I have known each other for so long, we are both pretty active in a professional association for folks in our industry, ethics and elections, and keeping government fair and transparent, et cetera. So we've kind of bonded over that over the years. And Steve and I were at such a conference once and I said, Steve, just lay it on me. What is one of your favorite stories, investigations, the things that make you kind of go, "Oh, wow, did I just hear what I heard?" And funnily enough, it relates to professional sports. Who'd a think, right? So, Steve, take it away.

**Steve:**

It starts with the Cubs' success, which is a rare thing for Chicagoans. And I can say that I'm both a Cubs and a White Sox fan and in my lifetime, I've seen both the Cubs and the White Sox win one world championship, which is good enough for me. But what happened is that, to everybody's surprise, the Cubs made it to the postseason in 2016 and of course, went on to win the World Series against Cleveland. And as the Cubs were making the postseason, we had a request for an advisory opinion, and the people requesting the opinion wanted to know - can city elected officials, including the mayor and the 50 city council members whom we call alderpersons, could they buy tickets at face value?

Years before, back in 2010, we had issued an opinion, and the opinion basically said that if an alderperson buys tickets at face value for a Cubs game or a White Sox game, particularly one that is high demand, and I'll get to what high demand means in just a minute, that they can do that as long as they are announced by the Cubs or by the White Sox on the PA system. And so when we were asked this in late September of 2016, as it was apparent that the Cubs were going to make the postseason, we've kind of reissued that opinion.

At the same time, we had a new chair coming in who has recently stepped down, and I'm sure you remember Bill Conlon. He was a former U.S. attorney, now he's a retired senior partner from the Sidley and Austin firm, one of the finest human beings and lawyers that I've ever worked with in my life. Bill was a new chair, and he said, Steve, I'm not comfortable with that. He said, you know, the city council regulates the Cubs. The Cubs are always dealing with the city and were at the time because of expansions to Wrigley Field, liquor licenses, innumerable things that the Cubs deal with the city of Chicago on. Bill said I'm just not comfortable with that. So he said, we have to be stricter because city council members and the mayor regulate the Cubs.

So we did some research, and we looked at as many ethics opinions that we could find. And there are a couple of really interesting opinions that we have, that we attached to our formal opinion that was issued in October of 2016 - one from the New York City Conflicts of Interest Board, one from the Kentucky Board of Ethics, dealing with the Kentucky Derby. And what the board ended up opining on was that a city elected official, whether it's the mayor or a city official or city employee, wishes to attend a high demand game, and a high demand game the opinion defines as an event where the general public would have to pay more than \$50 over face value. Why \$50? Because we have an annual \$50 gift limit.

**Susan:**

Okay.

**Steve:**

So what we said was that it's a gift. If you buy tickets at face value for an event that the general public is going to have to pay anywhere from \$51 over face all the way up to \$4,000 over a face. You know, there were rumors that when the Cubs made the World Series, people were willing to give a kidney, you know, for tickets, okay?

**Susan:**

\*laughs\*

**Steve:**

Chicago is a strange baseball town, a lovable baseball town,

**Susan:**

Not a lot of long term thinking there really, more short term. Right? Yeah.

**Steve:**

Exactly! So what the board said is that if it's a high demand event and you want to buy tickets at face value and not go on to the secondary market on StubHub or Vivid, just like any member of the public, they have to perform some sort of official function at the game. Either they have to march in with the color guard, or they have to sing the National Anthem, or they have to give an address to the crowd. It's not enough just to be recognized and wave - probably booed.

**Susan:**

So if the, if the mayor was asked to throw out the first pitch on opening day, that would be a ceremonial event.

**Steve:**

Yeah, yes.

**Susan:**

So before we get to the reaction that the board received from the alderpersons, I'm curious to know, was the board all in accord? Was this kind of a unanimous, they all felt pretty comfortably.

**Steve:**

Yes.

**Susan:**

Okay, that wasn't the pushback. So for everybody listening to the podcast, the favorite part of my story, it shouldn't shock anybody listening to this podcast that sporting tickets are among the most commonly discussed gift issue under ethics laws. It's what followed the feedback that your board received, right, Steve? That kind of still has me both reeling and giggling just a little bit. Would you mind filling us in on sort of the reaction you received?

**Steve:**

Sure. Well, okay. So there were a number of alderpersons who called and said, Steve, what the hell man? I'm there representing my constituents. Another one said, "Steve, this is the effin World Series." And he didn't say effin. He spelled it out. And I said, I said, alderman, listen, this is what the board's decision is. And I said, you cannot really argue that you're representing your constituents. You can't.

**Susan:**

That was their actual argument? That my my presence represents my people?

**Steve:**

Yes, yes. And the board dismissed that argument and said, that's complete nonsense.

We had another another alderperson who said, I want to go to the World Series, but I can't afford to buy tickets on the secondary market value. I'm an alderperson. I deserve to be able to buy tickets at face value from Major League Baseball.

**Susan:**

Okay so here's my question, Steve, are you able to estimate about ten years ago what the alderpersons were actually earning annually?

**Steve:**

Yeah they were, uh, it hasn't changed much. They were earning, probably, it ranges, but it's from about 105 to about \$120,000. That's what it was ten years ago.

**Susan:**

So how do you suppose their, the reaction was of their constituents who hear comments like that, that I can't afford...

**Steve:**

Well, I don't know. It's sort of a cognitive dissonance there.

**Susan:**

Right!?

**Steve:**

But but a number of them made that argument to us. And we said it doesn't matter who you are.

**Susan:**

So I have to ask, ten years later, that opinion, that advisory opinion still stands today?

**Steve:**

Yes, yes it does.

**Susan:**

Is it, do you think it's kind of considered just, this is just part of who we are? No, there's no pushback anymore. Has that sort of hullabaloo died down in the past 10 years?

**Steve:**

I think the hullabaloo has died, yes.

**Susan:**

Okay, okay.

**Steve:**

I mean, in part because we haven't had a successful baseball team since 2016. At least that's made it that far. So it's been quiet. Now, that said, if the Cubs or the White Sox do make the postseason again this year, especially if they get past the first round, we will have questions about this. And, you know, we have a lot of new city council members that were not members of the city council back in 2016, and there probably will be some frustration. It's a pretty bold opinion, but it's still good law.

**Susan:**

What I find interesting about it is, I mean, I think some things are fairly obvious. Like like the question at stake here wasn't, can they take the tickets for free? That wasn't - it was that issue of access.

**Steve:**

That's right.

**Susan:**

That that general person walking down the Magnificent Mile in Chicago cannot pick up the phone to the Cubs and say, hey, can I get one of those coveted tickets at face value?

**Steve:**

That's exactly right.

**Susan:**

It was that, I think that access issue is one that we should all be aware of, as well, as people in public service, so.

**Steve:**

Yes, that's an excellent point. That's an excellent point.

**Susan:**

So just partly just because you lived through that and many more, but also just your 30 plus years. Why do these laws still make sense in protecting the public today? Why does the public care that they should not be allowed to have that access to by those tickets?

**Steve:**

Because it all has to do with public confidence in government. And gifts, gifts in particular, as you know, are one of the things that cause the greatest cynicism about government in the public eye. You know, that that elected officials or career government service people are in it for the money and that they're taking special advantage of their inside connections, or they're taking advantage of the fact that they regulate a business and the business therefore offers them something and if they accept then they'll, there's a "hint, hint, wink, wink, nod, nod" that they'll go easier on the regulated entity. There's really no other topic in ethics law, not even nepotism, I think, because nepotism is much more common in the private sector, of course, than it is in government. I don't think there's any other topic that gets the public anger up as much as the perception that government officials are taking advantage of their government position for special benefits to themselves or for their family.

**Susan:**

Could you just give a word after devoting so much of your life to public service, to good people in public service who may feel a little bit beaten down or feel like the the tide has turned, that people aren't thanking them for their public service. Could you just give a word to good people of integrity serving government today?

**Steve:**

I will tell you that over the years I've dealt with so many honest public servants that want to do the right thing, and they're concerned about doing the right thing. They know the consequences of doing the wrong thing. They know how negatively it impacts them, their department, the government's reputation, etc.. Whenever somebody calls, we, we just make it a point to say, we so much appreciate the fact that you contacted us before you took action. And it's unfortunate that the media doesn't really care about that. You know, one of the ongoing comments that I've had over decades is the media doesn't care about the fact that we issue at the Board of Ethics here, and this is common for many ethics agencies, about 4,000 advisory opinions a year, most of which are by telephone or by email. And I'm not saying that we're avoiding 4,000 major scandals, but this is an indication that government employees, by and large, want to do the right thing. You know, you don't get much public recognition, but know that your ethics regulators truly appreciate your good conscience. They truly do.

**Susan:**

That's a good word, Steve. That's a good word. Yeah, yeah. Alright,

**Steve:**

And one message to your - Go Reds and Go Guardians!

**Susan:**

Amen!

**Steve:**

I have a soft spot for both teams.

**Susan:**

I like that. Well, hey Steve, thank you so much, I'm really grateful for your time, for your wisdom, for your friendship these last two decades. I hope we can maybe have you back again sometime the next time you have a really great story come across your desk.

**Steve:**

Oh Susan, thank you!

*\*crowd sound effect, baseball announcer: "There goes a long drive to left field – it's a home run!"\**

**Susan:**

Not only do I hope that you enjoyed our visit with Steve Berlin but also garnered some valuable tips that may be helpful to your own public service here in Ohio.

For example, it's absolutely true in both Chicago and in Ohio that for all of us in public service, the best practice to follow when offered a ticket or other entertainment item by some company or entity that is in some way interacting with our public agency, is to pay the fair market value of that ticket or item. Why? Because the Ohio Ethics Law prohibits us in public service from accepting these items of substantial value from those entities that are, you know, doing business with us, seeking to do business, regulated by, they have an interest in matters before our public agencies. In a nutshell? Paying your own way is simply the best policy.

Now, in terms of the "access issue" that Steve and I discussed, the Advisory Opinions and Fact Sheets in the show notes can be very helpful. For a quick summary, though, once again when some company, regulated entity or the equivalent, offers us some sort of ticket, something substantial, the best practice, again, is to decline or – at a minimum – pay the fair market value of the ticket. This not only keeps us on the straight and narrow ethics path but also helps to avoid even the appearance of impropriety.

In particular, I want to note the 1996 Advisory Opinion that is linked in the show notes - it says that the "minimum fair market value" of something is basically the lowest price a similar benefit could reasonably cost in that same area, at the same time, and under similar market conditions. In some situations, the fair market value can be higher than the ticket's printed price. And if that's the case it may not even be legal for us to buy that, whether you can ever pay that face value for that ticket for that specific situation. When you get to that point, that's something you'll want to discuss with your agency's legal counsel before moving forward.

Now, that's our show for today! A huge "thank you" to Steve Berlin for joining me on the podcast and thanks, as always to Nick Rohrbaugh, our editor and my co-producer of the podcast.

But before we close, I do want to recognize two young heroes from the Crestview Local School district in Ashland, Ohio — siblings Charlie and Catrina Thomas. This past school year, when their school bus driver suddenly stopped breathing, these kids did not freeze. Catrina quickly recognized something was wrong, and her brother Charlie used the two-way radio to call for help. Their calm thinking and willingness to act helped to save a life. And I want to note – at the time, these kids were only 13 and 8 years old.

On this podcast, we call that kind of example a "True North Award." The True North Award is a verbal recognition on this podcast of people who demonstrate the very best in ethics integrity and character.

While most of our work focuses on public service, this podcast will occasionally recognize people from all walks of life who remind us what it means to simply be a quality human being.

Charlie and Catrina showed us that ethics is not just about rules or titles. It's about awareness, responsibility, and stepping forward with courage. For those of us in public service, that's an example worth following. So Charlie and Catrina, hats off to you for being really cool kids and, even more, really amazing human beings.

And that's it for this episode of The Voice of Ethics. Be sure to join us again in two weeks when we'll continue our foray into all things summertime and ethics!

Until then, I leave you with this puzzling question:

*\*crow noise sound effect\**

Why would Cinderella be a bad baseball player?

*\*baseball announcer: "Here it comes"\**

Because she runs away from the ball!

*\*baseball announcer: "Swing and a miss"\**

I know you're all groaning out there, but I also know perfectly well, you'll be telling that joke at the very next baseball game you attend.

Okay, that's it everybody – see you soon! Take care! Be ethical! Bye!