



The Voice of Ethics Podcast Transcript

August 2026 Episode

A Hole-in-One Too Close to Home

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. So this episode is airing in sunny August, so I hope you are enjoying your summer doing whatever it is you love to do in the dog days of Ohio's August. Maybe swimming, or maybe reading a good book in the hammock, in the shade in your backyard.

Or if you're like my youngest brother, maybe you love to golf. **sound effect golf club striking ball** So, hey little brother PJ, (yes everyone we still call him PJ, even though he's in his 50s,) in honor of your love of golfing, PJ, this episode is dedicated to you. And to everybody else - no one ask me how it's possible that my youngest brother is in his 50s, even though I'm still 39 years old.

Anyway, here's this week's story. Okay. Imagine you buy a home because of what's behind your backyard. Maybe it's a park, maybe it's a lake. Maybe it's a golf course. Whatever it is, the surrounding property becomes part of what makes your home special to you. It influences your quality of life, and maybe it even affects your property value. Now imagine that years later, you become an elected official.

Suddenly, decisions about that neighboring property - that golf course, maybe - start showing up on government agendas. What do you do? Can you participate? Can you vote? Can you help solve problems if you have, you know, useful knowledge and relationships? That's what we're gonna talk about today. Today's story explores those questions and highlights how conflicts of interest can arise, even when a public official just believes they're honestly trying to help.

Now, as always, we're leaving out names and locations. Our goal in this podcast has never been to shame individuals. It's to learn from real situations and understand how Ohio's Ethics Laws can help maintain public trust in government.

So this story does, in fact, begin with a city owned golf course. For years, the course had been an important community asset. Residents played there, visitors came to enjoy it, and city leaders worked to ensure that the golf course remains successful. Now, one city council member had a particularly close relationship to the course because his home bordered the golf course property. He was also a long term member and user of that golf course. So in a lot of ways, he knew the facility better than most people.

So when issues involving the golf course would arise, city officials viewed him as someone who could help. Now, according to the investigation that later happened, city administrators had asked this gentleman to assist with resolving various matters because he had a strong working relationship with the managers who were operating the golf course. Now, at first glance, that probably seems completely reasonable, doesn't it?

Who better to help than someone who knows the facility, understands the issues, and has relationships with the people involved? But here's the thing - Ethics Laws often require public officials to look beyond what seems practical in that moment, because sometimes the very reason that makes someone helpful can also create a conflict of interest. So back to our story. As discussions continued regarding lease arrangements and other matters involving that golf course, the council member participated in negotiations and discussions related to that golf course.

Again, the one that backs up to his own personal property. Now, eventually, a lease addendum came before the City Council for approval, and when the matter came up for a vote, the council member in question here voted in favor of the ordinance. And that's where the ethics issue emerges, both in the participation and certainly then in the vote.

The concern wasn't that the council member got some sort of payment or bribe or anything. It wasn't that he owned the golf course. There was no evidence that he personally profited from that discussion, negotiation, decision, vote, etc.. Instead, the issue is that decisions involving property immediately adjacent to our residence means we can't participate in matters because it could or does affect our own private interests, like our own property value.

Think about it from the perspective of a resident maybe sitting in that room watching that city council meeting. If a city decision could potentially affect that council member's own property, residents have the right to wonder, reasonably, whether that official can be completely impartial, even if the official believes they're acting objectively or they're acting in good faith, even if they never receive a dime because of this whole negotiation/decision.

Ethics Laws aren't just talking about actual favoritism. They're about preserving public confidence in the fairness of governmental actions and decisions. The public deserves confidence that government actions are based on what's best for the community as a whole, not just in what might benefit the private interests of individual decision makers. So back to our story. The Ethics Commission did conclude that this city council member's participation in matters involving that golf course did support a violation of our conflict of interest laws here in Ohio, because those matters, again, affected property that he owned.

But to be fair, our investigation also revealed several important mitigating factors. First, city administrators had actually encouraged this city council member's involvement because of his familiarity with the golf course and relationship with those managers. Second, he had no prior public sector experience before joining City Council, so he probably wasn't real familiar with our laws. And like many newly appointed or elected officials, he was still learning the legal and ethical responsibilities that came with his office.

Perhaps most importantly, investigators did find, they found no evidence that he had somehow benefited from the vote and he did participate cooperatively in this investigation. So after considering those factors, the commission did resolve the matter through what's called a settlement agreement rather than referring it for prosecution.

So what can you and I, as people in public service, learn from this story? Well, first, one lesson is that conflicts of interest can be broader than we sometimes assume. Sometimes people think Ethics Laws only apply if some public official actually receives money, or they direct business to themselves. Certainly those would be problematic, but "private interests" can take on a lot of forms. Maybe it's a business interest, a family interest, employment interest, or even in this case, a property interest.

The second lesson is that expertise and good intentions, they don't eliminate conflicts of interest. In this case, the council member became involved because people believed he could help solve the problem, but it's that same connection that created the ethical concern for him. And maybe the biggest lesson is this: in your years of public service, listeners to this podcast, if you find yourselves asking "Gee, should I participate in this conversation because I know a lot about it?"

It may also be worth asking the follow up question: do I have a personal interest in the outcome? Or does my family? Do my outside business interests? Because sometimes the questions can point us in opposite directions, and certainly always at the Ethics Commission, we always say the best tool available to all of us in public service is simply asking for advice before acting.

A quick phone call before that discussion, that vote, participating, it can prevent a difficult situation later. Because don't forget, ethics laws aren't designed to prevent people from serving in government. In public service. No. Ethics laws are designed to help all of us in public service recognize when we need to step back, so the public can have confidence in the decisions that are being made. In the end, this story wasn't ever really about a golf course then, was it?

It's about trust. It's about understanding that even when someone's trying to help, there are times when the most ethical and logical action is not participating at all. And that's a lesson we can all carry with us, whether we're dealing with a golf course, a neighborhood development, a public park, or any other issue that touches close to home, if you will.

And that's it for this week. Check out our show notes to review a Fact Sheet regarding public service and property matters for additional information, and be sure to join us for our next episode, where we continue our search for the very best in ethics stories. Some good, some gone awry, but all that teach us how not to swing and miss **sound effect of club whiffing through air** when it comes to unethical behavior.

Do they use that phrase in golf too or is that just baseball? I don't know! Until then, I have to close this episode with a question about my brother PJ. Do you know why my brother PJ brought an extra pair of pants with him to go golfing last weekend? Just in case he got a hole in one. **sound effect of golf clap**

Ha! Love you PJ. Take care everyone. Be ethical. Bye.