

The Voice of Ethics Podcast Transcript
October 2026 Episode
Conference Survival Guide

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 our conference survival guide for public officials and employees. Conferences serve an important purpose. They help us learn, share ideas, build professional relationships, and do our jobs better. But they also create situations where the rules governing gifts, things of values, travel, relationships with people who do business with us can come into play.

So today we're going to talk about some of those situations, how to recognize potential problems before you find yourself holding that expensive door prize thinking, “Huh…maybe I should have asked about this first?”

And if you were going to ask such a question, who might you want to go to? Our favorite Chief Advisory Attorney at the Ohio Ethics Commission, Chris Woeste. **clapping** Chris is here. Yay Chris!

Chris:
Thanks for having me, Susan.

Susan:
Okay, Chris, we're going to start with a pop quiz. Are you ready?

Chris:
I’m ready.

Susan:
All right. Here we go. You're at a conference. Vendor hands you a gift. Can you take it?

Chris:
It depends.

Susan:
All right, how about: that vendor invites you for a really nice dinner. Can you go?

Chris:
It depends.

Susan:
All right. You win the door prize. Can you keep it?

Chris:
It depends.

Susan:
All right. Chris, is there anything I can just take?

Chris:
Maybe.

Susan:
All right, this has been Chris Woeste with the Ohio Ethics Commission!

All right, I'm just kidding. I'm just kidding. Chris, thank you so much for joining us today.

Chris:
Aw, thank you for having me, Susan - I reprised my role from the e-course. So, happy to be here.

Susan:
If any, yeah, if any of you have listened to the e-course you've kind of picked up on our inside joke there, that was Chris' role on the e-course for this year.

So, Chris, you talk about things of value all the time.

Chris:
Yes. We get tons of questions on things of value and particularly related to conferences every day here at the Ethics Commission.

Susan:
What are some of the most common things you hear about?

Chris:
We get a lot of questions about travel expenses, gifts and meals because those come up a lot when people are traveling for conferences.

Susan:
So talk about the travel thing first, because before we even get to the conference, don't some agencies just pay for their people to go, like, they pay for the hotel costs or whatever?

Chris:
Many agencies do pay for their people to attend conferences, but oftentimes vendors will offer to pay for travel expenses. You'll have other organizations who will try to pay for travel expenses, and those can be a lot of money.

Susan:
And I imagine the answer of whether or not they're allowed to do it is: it depends.

Chris:
It does depend.

It depends a lot on who is providing the money for those travel expenses. One of the things we look at here at the Commission is: where's the source of the money? Is it an improper source? And particularly, is it someone who is doing or seeking to do business with, interested in matters before, or regulated by the public agency?

That prohibits them from providing that gift of a travel expense to a public employee, because that would be an improper influence on that employee in their public position or potentially an improper influence. And that's what we're trying to avoid. We want to make sure that public officials are acting in the interest of their constituency.

Susan:
What about registration fees?

Chris:
In most instances, you can't accept registration fees as well. But there's one really big exception to this that applies to people like you, Susan.

Susan:
Yeah

Chris:
If you are a speaker at a conference, they're allowed to pay your registration fee. It wouldn't make sense for these public speakers to be coming in and paying registration to every single conference they have to attend - and I know you attend hundreds throughout the year.

Susan:
Right? Yeah.

Chris:
So that would be a big expense to the public agency. But typically, if you're not a speaker at an event, in most cases you can't accept those registration fees.

Susan:
Okay. So this person, they realize that vendor or regulated party can't pay for their hotel or their airfare. So the agency says, yes, we think that's a legitimate use of professional development money. We're going to send you to the conference in Chicago or whatever. So the person arrives and they walk into that vendor ballroom. Is it illegal, Chris, like if someone hands me a little Mr. Goodbar or a hand sanitizer? Can you talk a little bit about this stuff that we're like, “Yeah, we're not too worried about that.”

Chris:
So the real question here is, is the item they're trying to give you of substantial value. The little trinkets you get at conferences: a mug, a little squishy ball - I have a bunch of those on my desk -

Susan:
Oh yeah!

Chris:
Those are totally acceptable. Those are de minimis, are minimal value, so they don't have any substantial value. The real issue is when you get into things of substantial value, you know, expensive meals, tickets to sporting events, things like that that are occasionally given out. You want to avoid those things.

Susan:
I think we probably get, probably not everybody's handing out like tickets to a Browns game at every table kind of thing. But that's where like the issue of like a door prize can come into play, right?

Chris:
Yeah. Oftentimes just attending a conference, you're automatically entered into the door prize.

Susan:
Right.

Chris:
Things we've seen given out in the past include cameras, laptops, drones. There's an opportunity for

people to get really high value items as part of that drawing. And in that case, you can't accept that gift from a vendor.

In one of my more interesting opinions we've had in my time here, a person won a car as part of a raffle drawing for a conference door prize.

Susan:
Holy moly. I'm going to the wrong conferences, Chris.

Chris:
Me too. Me too. No one's offering me a car.

Susan:
Right.

Chris:
But in that instance, the car was paid for by vendors of the public agency. And so they weren't able to accept that car.

Now the public agency has the option to keep that gift if they so choose. But that's up to the public agency, not that individual public official.

Susan:
Okay. So that's good to know, it's kind of like a donation. We're not saying that people can't donate something to a public agency. If I'm at a park conference and I quote unquote win (because it's not mine), I win a free swing set. It is okay if that is installed in the city park where I work. It just can't be installed in my backyard. Is that fair?

Chris:
Exactly. Yeah, it's up to the public agency at that point whether or not they want to accept that gift.

Susan:
And what if what I win, like, I mean, there's things I can think of, laptops, that we can genuinely use to fulfill our mission. What if I win a voucher for a day at a spa, a facial and manicure kind of thing?

Chris:
Yeah, so that's typically not something a public agency could use. And in that case it would be best to decline.

Susan:
Okay. So I win a voucher for - this actually happened once - a free cruise. I heard about this at one of the conferences I was attending. And I really want to go. My agency says, no, we can't use that.

And so here are my justifications of why I think I should be allowed to keep that cruise voucher. I'm attending the conference on public time, okay?

Chris:
Okay.

Susan:
But Chris, I promise it won't influence me.

Chris:
Well, it's not just you as an individual. You have to think about the potential for improper influence. Even if

you think that's not going to influence you, think about how the public is going to view that if you're now interacting with a vendor who gave you a free cruise! Especially during winter here in Ohio, that's particularly valuable.

Susan:
Amen. Well, and in fairness, I mean, this is not the bribery statute. We get that. Isn't it true that whether or not it influenced me at the end of the day isn't even that relevant? That I wasn't allowed to take it because it was substantial from an improper source?

Chris:
Exactly.

Susan:
Yeah.

Chris:
Exactly. You can't accept that cruise.

Susan:
So here's my next justification:

Okay, I get it. It doesn't matter if it influences me. But, Chris, I'm not the one who would make the decision whether or not our agency would go with that vendor. So doesn't that mean now I'm qualified to keep the cruise?

Chris:
No, unfortunately, you still can't go on the cruise there because it is a vendor of your agency.

Susan:
So at the end of the day, the answer is no with a period, not with a: no, comma, however you can for this or that kind of thing.

Chris:
No, and I understand, you know, we hear about a lot of interesting and high value gifts that are offered by vendors, and it's much more common in the private sector.

But us in the public sector, we have to hold ourselves to a high standard here and make sure we're following the law.

Susan:
That's a really good distinction, Chris, because there are conferences where everybody there is a public official or employee, you know like municipal league, things like that, but there are plenty of conferences that take place that there is a mixture of private and public sector.

And it is true, if I'm at, I don't know, the Ohio Society of Professional Engineers conference, and there's a private sector engineer sitting next to me, he or she can take the cruise if they want as long as their company says. It's just different because I'm in the public sector.

Chris:
Exactly.

Susan:
All right. So leaving door prizes, and we're going to head into the ballroom where it's lunch hour. They're going to have a plenary speaker, etc.. And I glance at the agenda, and I notice that the luncheon has

been sponsored by or underwritten, essentially paid for, by a company that I know my agency regulates or does business with. Am I allowed to partake in the lunch, or do I have to go to, you know, some subway shop and get a, you know, turkey sandwich for myself?

Chris:
Yeah. So if the lunch hour is held on site and it's an ordinary routine kind of lunch you would get at a conference, then you're good to go. The problem is if you're going off site, if you're getting something really valuable, that's where you get into potential issues. But if you're having a normal box lunch or typical plated chicken lunch, that sort of thing, you're fine.

Susan:
Okay. So those routine things, but that's different than, “Hey, this vendor that does business with my agency, they want to take everybody from my agency out for dinner that night off site at a restaurant.

Chris:
Yes, that's very different. If you're going off site, you're going to an expensive restaurant, then you're going to potentially run afoul of the Ethics Law and you should put up that stop sign.

Susan:
Could you talk a little bit about: is it just us people in public service? Are we the only ones that have that prohibition? What about the vendor that wants to take us out and pick up a $1,500 tab for dinner?

Chris:
Yeah. So there's a corollary to the Law that the vendors can't provide those things of substantial value to public officials and employees.

And I think this is particularly helpful, as when vendors are very insistent to remind them that the Law also applies to them. And even though they may be used to this in the private sector, it's not something they're able to provide.

Susan:
And I would note, too, that, it is true, let's say in that situation, even if the Ethics Commission didn't find investigations were necessary for each individual employee, let's say instead we investigate that vendor, etc., and that vendor has legal issues as a result.

Chris, I have to ask you - who's going to get the headline in the Columbus Dispatch the next Monday morning?

Chris:
It's definitely going to be the public agency.

Susan:
Absolutely. No question about it. So I think it's a good idea just to be aware anyway.

So, Chris, one of the things people have asked me about that I feel a little less equipped to answer so I'm going to go to someone wiser than I (and that's you.) What about this whole issue of: but we split the check. Does that matter?

Chris:
Yeah. So if you're paying for your meal, then you're not accepting a gift. As long as you're paying the actual value of that meal. And a lot of times what will happen is a vendor will pick up the tab and public official or employees will try to pay them back.

The vendor will say, “No, no, no, we can't accept.” And that's where you have to remind them the law applies to them. They can't be giving you a thing of substantial value as well. They have to accept that repayment.

Susan:
We're not suggesting here you can't be pals with somebody. If you want to go out to dinner with that company rep that you've become pals with over the years, and you guys want to go out to dinner - if you're paying your own way, no harm, no foul.

Chris:
Yep, that's perfectly fine.

Susan:
One more thing. You know, I will say that there probably are some conferences that take place in some really neat places, right? Even smaller cities we don't think about, you know, that might be a really fun getaway.

So I'm wondering if I'm going to be attending a conference for my agency in, you know, Duluth, is my husband allowed to come with me if he wants to explore Duluth? Are there any restrictions there?

Chris:
So your husband can join you at that conference. But your husband has to pay his own way. You can't have any additional expenses to the public agency.

Susan:
That makes sense. All right, Chris, we've taken so much of your day already. And everybody, I just want you to know that Chris supervises two other incredible Advisory Attorneys - even in light of how busy Chris and his two advisory attorneys are, the reason that they are always so generous with their time and their wisdom, and their advice is because they, too, are dedicated to this idea of proactively helping people. Our investigative team, they're amazing. You guys, they do their jobs well, they do them professionally, thoroughly. But at the end of the day, Chris and my goal would be to reduce their caseload. We would rather have it be that people ask questions, get information in advance, rather than ever have to be investigated.

Chris:
Exactly. And no one wants to be on the front page of the paper in a bad way. That's what we're here for, to answer those questions, to avoid any issues in advance. And I'm always encouraged by the number of people who give us a call. There are so many dedicated public servants in Ohio who are trying to do things the right way, and “person who follows the law” doesn't make the news, but we talk to thousands of them every day all across the state.

Susan:
Aw, I couldn't end on a better word of wisdom there. Chris, thank you so much for joining us today. I hope we can get in a future podcast on a different topic sometime.

Chris:
It's my pleasure. I’d look forward to it.

Susan:
I hope you all enjoyed my conversation with Chief Advisory Attorney Chris Woeste as much as I did. We are so lucky to have Chris and our two other Advisory Attorneys on the Ethics Commission team.

And just to reiterate one more time what Chris said, please don't ever hesitate to reach out to these Advisory Attorneys when you need more information about conferences or anything else under the Ethics Law. And don't forget to check out the show notes where we have linked our conference fact sheet, which spells out much of the excellent guidance that Chris noted in this episode today.

So that's it for this week. Please join us again in two weeks for our next episode, but until then, I just thought that you might want to know that recently, a bison, a cow, and a swordfish all attended a business conference.

They were all steakholders. **cow mooing sound effect**

Take care. Be ethical. Bye.