

Ethics Update

A newsletter from the Anne Arundel County Ethics Commission

March 2008, Issue 42

That old law about "an eye for an eye" leaves everybody blind. The time is always right to do the right thing.

-Martin Luther King

APRIL 15: IT'S NOT JUST ABOUT TAXES ANY MORE

If you are one of the 200 plus county elected or appointed officials, employees, or volunteers who file an annual financial disclosure form, here's your annual reminder. The filing deadline is April 15, 2008.

Some of you will file the full Financial Disclosure Statement. Others, including volunteers on some boards and commissions will file the shorter Conflict of Interest Statements. Members of the Housing Authority file a Modified Conflict of Interest Statement. Who files which form is determined by ordinance, or in some cases, the Anne Arundel County Charter.

If you don't file on time, you will be charged a late fee of \$2.00 per day, up to a maximum of \$250.00. The late fee will not be waived unless you:

(1) advise the commission *in advance* that you will be filing late; AND

(2) you have a really *good reason* for not filing on time.

Good reasons include: serious illness (and we're not talking about

colds or flu), active duty military service, or family emergencies.

Unacceptable reasons (reasons that have been tried and failed) include the following excuses:

"I've been out of town."

"Nothing's changed since last year."

"I didn't know I had to file this *every* year."

"I forgot."

"I never received it in the mail."

"I know it's around here somewhere."

"My secretary was supposed to mail it."

"I'm not an employee. I don't get paid. I'm a volunteer for goodness sake, so why should I have to fill out this stupid form?"

"I already fill out the state form."

The search for someone to blame is always successful.

- Robert Half, American entrepreneur, (1918- 2001)

HELPFUL TIPS FOR FILERS:

- The 2008 financial disclosure statement actually only covers the 2007 calendar year.
- Answering "I don't know" to any item is not sufficient.

- Unlike the IRS, the ethics commission staff is really happy to help any filer by responding quickly to all questions. The staff will even assist you, over the phone and without an appointment, in filling out your form.

- The most common mistake is checking the word, "no", in Schedule G, indicating that neither you nor any family members have any income. ALL sources of income, whether earned or dropped from the sky, must be reported for you, your spouse, and all dependent children.

- Don't ignore Schedule H. If you have outside activities and interests, list them. Remember, the purpose of a disclosure statement is DISCLOSURE.

- Yes, this statement is a public document. Yes, that means that anybody may look at your statement. Yes, you will be notified if somebody examines or copies your statement.

- Complaining to the ethics commission is as effective as complaining to the IRS. Besides, the commission members (all volunteers) and the executive director also file an annual statement.

- Feel free to complain to your council member or the county executive about having to fill out this statement. As much as they might want to, they can't help you. The state law dictates to the county what disclosure is required, so for the most part, only the state legislature can change these rules.

• Remember that public service is good citizenship. It comes with responsibilities. You serve the citizens and you are accountable to them. Remembering these obligations may make it a little more palatable to fill out your statement.

One man practicing good sportsmanship is better than 50 preaching it.

– Knute Rockne, college football coach (1888-1931)

SUMMARY OF RECENT OPINIONS

Summaries of opinions issued since the last *Ethics Update* follow. Do not rely on a summary for guidance. Full opinions are available at:

<http://www.aacounty.org/Ethics/indexOpinions.cfm>

AO-07-89: A former assistant planning and zoning officer may, on behalf of a new employer, bid on, and participate in a contract to provide the county with a report on the housing impact that will accompany the BRAC project.

AO-07-93: A member of the Planning Advisory Board may continue to belong to various civic associations but the ethics law limits the board member's participation in both the private organizations and the county board.

AO-07-95: The members of the county council may participate in matters affecting retiree benefits even though the members may be affected by the outcome of their participation. Previous ethics

commission opinions addressing this issue acknowledge that the ethics law permits participation in the presence of a conflict of interest when there is nobody else who may act and when the conflict is publicly disclosed.

AO-08-08: County employees who own and operate a private business may not participate in a contract with the county.

ETHICS TRAINING

Each session begins at 9:00 a.m., ends by noon and includes a 20-minute video. Training may also be scheduled for your own group at your own work location. Just call to arrange it.

Upcoming sessions are:

Wednesday,	April	2
Wednesday,	April	16
Wednesday,	May	7
Wednesday,	May	21*
Wednesday,	Sept.	17
Wednesday,	Oct.	15

* There will be no ethics training sessions scheduled during the summer. Let's all hope for good beach weather.

ANSWER TO THE LAST TEST

It was President Theodore Roosevelt who said,

“Peace can endure only so long as humanity really insists upon it, and is willing to work for it and sacrifice for it. Twenty- five years ago American fighting men looked to the statesmen of the world to finish the work of peace for which they fought and suffered; we failed them, we failed them then, we cannot fail them again and expect the world to survive again.”

AND NOW, ANOTHER TEST

One morning you arrive at your desk to find an envelope with your name on it. Inside is a gift card for \$100 to your favorite store. The donor is not identified. What would an ethical employee do? What would you do?

P.S. If you don't know the answers, you haven't had ethics training- or you need it again.

Prize: The first 3 people to answer correctly will receive a genuine ethics commission mug.

When you're arguing with a fool, make sure he isn't doing the same thing. *– Anonymous*

WATCH FOR IT

The 2007 Annual Report will be available on the ethics commission website as of March 1. The report, mandated by ordinance since 2003, has been submitted to the county council, the county executive, and to the public, every year since 1994, when the commission was created. Every report from 2002 is available on the ethics commission website. The annual report is a good way for the county government and the citizens to judge whether the ethics commission is doing what it is supposed to be doing. We're accountable!

Know yourself. Don't accept your dog's admiration as conclusive evidence that you're wonderful.

– Ann Landers, advice columnist (1918-2002)