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Contra Costa County Grand Jury Report 1105

ETHICS AND TRANSPARENCY ISSUES IN CONTRA COSTA COUNTY

**TO: Contra Costa County Board of Supervisors
Contra Costa Local Agency Formation Commission
Cities in Contra Costa County
Independent Special Districts in Contra Costa County**

SUMMARY

Ethical behavior and transparency (openness) by public officials are essential to good government. Despite the fact that County officials receive ethics training, the Grand Jury has found instances of ethical breaches.

In some cases, there have been public accusations of ethical misbehavior and/or misrepresentation, charges of nepotism and cronyism, and allegations of long-term County mismanagement of a mitigation fund.

The Grand Jury believes that greater effort must be made to improve openness and accountability, to display more sensitivity to ethical considerations, and to be aware of any appearances of impropriety to the public.

BACKGROUND

Effective January 1, 2006, AB 1234 (Government Code Sections 53232, et seq.) required that local officials who receive compensation, salary, stipends, or expense reimbursements must receive training in public service ethics laws and principles. The requirement applies not only to the governing body of a local agency but also to members of commissions, committees, boards, or other local agency bodies, whether permanent or temporary, decision-making or advisory. Training must be renewed every two years.

According to the Fair Political Practices Commission and the California Attorney General, training regarding conflicts of interest, perquisites of office and governmental transparency should include the following:

(1) Laws relating to personal financial gain by public servants...

- (A) Laws prohibiting bribery (Pen. Code, § 68)
- (B) Conflicts of Interest under the Political Reform Act (Gov. Code, §§ 87100, 87103).
- (C) Contractual Conflicts of Interest (Gov. Code, § 1090 et seq.).
- (D) Conflicts of Interest and Campaign Contributions (Gov. Code, § 84308).
- (E) Conflicts of Interest When Leaving Office (Gov. Code, §§ 87406.3, 87407).

(2) Laws relating to claiming perquisites of office

(3) Government transparency laws

(4) Laws relating to fair processes

The Grand Jury has divided the remainder of this report into several sections. Each section contains its own findings and recommendations. An overall finding and recommendation has also been made that may apply to all agencies throughout the County.

LAFCO: SOME MEMBERS OVERSTEPPING THEIR BOUNDARIES

BACKGROUND

The Contra Costa Local Agency Formation Commission (LAFCO) reviews, approves, or disapproves changes in organization to cities and special districts including annexations, detachments, new formations and incorporations. Its members (commissioners) serve the entire county and are to be neutral decision makers. LAFCO commissioners are guided by a Commissioner's Handbook which states:

“Government Code Section 56325.1 states that while serving on the Commission all members shall exercise their independent judgment on behalf of the interests of residents, property owners and the public as a whole.”

In May, 2010, two LAFCO commissioners addressed a developer-sponsored local ballot measure to extend the Urban Limit Line of the City of Brentwood. Prior to the election, these commissioners signed a public letter indicating that they were speaking not only as LAFCO spokespeople, but as representatives of the Contra Costa County Mayors' Conference, their appointing agency. They stated that should Brentwood voters defeat Measure F, LAFCO could annex the land in question to Antioch. Further, certain other LAFCO commissioners, instead of speaking to these statements, chose to weigh in supportively on the **content** of the letter, when the matter was not before LAFCO. The measure failed, and both LAFCO and the Mayors' Conference took some action to address this.

LAFCO stated that its procedures do not allow for reprimand or removal of offenders, but inserted new language into the Commissioner’s Handbook (1.4 Rules and Procedures – Section F.5) which details when a commissioner may act as a spokesperson.

The Mayors’ Conference, while voting (12-4) not to remove the involved commissioners, issued an admonishment, and adopted an amendment to the Conference Policies and Procedures statement prohibiting individual positions from being expressed as representative of the will of the Conference. In its motion, the Mayors’ Conference stated that it “is not in the business of taking issues on individual matters, especially when pitting one city against another.”

The Grand Jury recognizes that some corrective actions have been taken. However, some LAFCO members weighed in favorably on the import of the letter. While LAFCO had the option to recommend removal to the offending members’ appointing authority for “malfeasance of office” (Commissioner Handbook 1.2), it did not do so.

FINDINGS

1. Some LAFCO members committed ethical breaches by indicating that they spoke on behalf of LAFCO and the Mayors’ Conference on matters not before LAFCO.
2. Certain other LAFCO members weighed in inappropriately on the statements.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. All LAFCO members, including the public member, should receive regular training per AB 1234*, on the LAFCO Commissioners Handbook with particular focus on LAFCO’s mission statement and ethics, as well as the Updated Commissioner Representation policy (1.4 Rules and Procedures – Section F.5).
2. LAFCO should promptly consider appropriate action when a violation of its policies occurs.

***AB 1234 - Local Officials Ethics Training Requirement**

The newest of these ethics training requirements applies to certain local public officials. While similar to the rules for state officials that have been in place since 1998, the rules applicable to local officials are different in content, including a requirement that these officials receive training not only in applicable ethics laws but also in ethics principles and agency rules.

NEPOTISM ALIVE IN CEMETERY DISTRICT

BACKGROUND

Nepotism is favoritism (as in appointment to a job) based on kinship.¹

Nepotism undermines public trust by making government look like a family business run not for the community, but for the families in power.²

The Contra Costa County Board of Supervisors (BOS) makes appointments to certain special district boards. Each Supervisor recommends appointments for their respective district, after public notice of vacancy and interviews of applicants have been completed.

Recently, when a Supervisor's spouse sought an opening on the board of a small cemetery district, this notice and interview process was not initially followed. As a result, there was significant public reaction to the appearance of nepotism.

The spouse of one Supervisor sat on LAFCO, which regulates County boundaries. A prerequisite for this person's inclusion on LAFCO was being on the board of a special district. This person's current special district membership was ending soon and he sought a special district slot elsewhere.

In violation of California's Maddy Act (Gov. Code Section 54970-54974) the Clerk of the Board failed to advertise/post this opening to the public. As a result, several interested candidates were not considered or interviewed. The Supervisor self-recused and another Supervisor recommended appointment of the spouse. Ultimately, the BOS referred the process to an impartial outside panel, so as to avoid any real or perceived conflict-of-interest. The position was then advertised and applications from eight people were received.

After an interview process, a different individual was recommended by the special panel and was appointed by the BOS.

Subsequently, the BOS adopted an anti-nepotism policy that prohibits appointment by BOS members of relatives, domestic partners, and individuals with shared business interests to Boards, Councils, and Advisory Panels.

¹ Merriam-Webster Dictionary

² Robert Wechsler
Director of Research, City Ethics
<http://www.cityethics.org/node/811>

FINDINGS

1. There was a failure to advertise/post the open position, in compliance with the Maddy Act.

2. The initial recommendation to appoint the spouse of the Supervisor for the open special district position was not consistent with the appointment procedure.
3. At a minimum, these improprieties created the appearance of nepotism.
4. The formation of an outside, impartial panel to interview and select an applicant was appropriate.
5. The adoption of a County anti-nepotism policy was proper.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. The County should adopt a policy requiring the formation of impartial selection committees in situations where there are conflicts of interest, real or perceived, that cannot be adequately addressed by a normal recusal process.

THE DECOMPOSING OF THE KELLER CANYON MITIGATION FUND

BACKGROUND

The Keller Canyon Mitigation Fund (KCMF) was established in 1992 to lessen the impacts of an East County landfill on roads, open space, and the surrounding community. Funds are generated through dumping fees and granted through an application process. Approximately \$14 million has been awarded over the past ten years.

In 2005, the BOS voted to eliminate the Finance Committee oversight of the KCMF. Since then the District Supervisor, the Supervisor's Chief-of-Staff, and a County employee comprise the KCMF Committee, and have had discretion in the awarding of grants. Eligible recipients of grants have expanded from those who were truly impacted by the landfill to any non-profit groups the KCMF Committee deems eligible.

In 2010, a group of concerned citizens complained about irregularities with the KCMF's operations. The group conveyed its concerns to various County agencies. Among these were:

- KCMF is being used illegally as a political "slush fund."
- KCMF lacks required grantee and management paperwork (applications, work plans, progress reports, etc.).
- Substantial expenditures are being made outside of the intent and guidelines of the KCMF, often without required BOS approval.

The Contra Costa County Auditor-Controller's office addressed the charges in its November 5, 2010, "Response to Allegations Concerning the Keller Canyon Mitigation Fund" Report (Auditor's report).

A fraud audit was not performed. However, it was determined that the "internal control environment of the KCMF is seriously deficient" and that because of this there is "a possibility of fraud and abuse". In addition, it was determined that over the last 10 years, \$634,372 was spent without required BOS approval, and that since 2005, when BOS Finance Committee oversight ended, the fund has had a deficit in each of the following years.

The Auditor's report detailed some problem areas with the fund and recommended, among other goals, restoring transparency, accountability, and public confidence in county governance with regard to the KCMF.

One recommendation calls for establishment of an ethics policy and training for KCMF Committee members. This recommendation, which "includes a recusal provision," seeks to eliminate numerous instances where KCMF Committee members also sit on boards of grantee organizations.

At the time this Grand Jury report was written, the BOS had instructed the Finance Committee to review the Auditor's Report and its recommendations.

FINDINGS

1. Proper oversight of the KCMF by the BOS is lacking, which provides opportunity for impropriety.
2. The KCMF has distributed grants without the required applications, work plans, and follow-up reports.
3. The KCMF, as currently administered, is not transparent, and lends itself to a perception of being a "political slush fund," (defined as "A sum of money used for illicit or corrupt purposes, as for buying influence." (Webster's New Universal Unabridged Dictionary)).
4. Ethical concerns are raised when grants are awarded to organizations whose boards include members of the granting committee.
5. Despite the fact that \$14 million has been distributed over the past ten years, no annual report has been issued. At the time of the writing of this report, no County-linked website to the KCMF could be found.
6. Due to a lack of publicly available information about the KCMF, not all non-profit organizations, nor the public, are aware of the fund, its mission, and its processes, and thus are unable to benefit from it.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. The BOS should direct the County Administrator's Office to more closely monitor the KCMF activity and ensure compliance with BOS approval requirements, as well as application, work plan and performance reporting requirements.
2. The BOS should require training on and compliance with a County ethics policy for all KCMF Committee members.
3. An annual report for the KCMF should be issued, and a County-linked website should be established to clarify mission, application and selection process and requirements.
4. The BOS should consider re-establishing the Finance Committee oversight of grant awards.
5. The BOS should ensure that all County mitigation funds, or similar funds under the control of a single Supervisor, receive proper supervision.

OVERALL FINDING

The Grand Jury finds that:

1. Avoiding the appearance of unethical behavior especially with regard to conflicts-of interest and nepotism, is crucial to public confidence in governance.

OVERALL RECOMMENDATION

1. Each of the 19 cities, 28 independent special districts and the County should review and report to the Grand Jury on the adequacy of its:
 - a) nepotism policy;
 - b) conflict-of-interest policy; and
 - c) ethics training policy.

REQUIRED RESPONSES

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Overall Finding and Recommendation

Finding and Recommendation

Contra Costa County Board of Supervisors 1

REQUESTED RESPONSES

Overall Finding and Recommendation

Finding and Recommendation

The cities of: Antioch, Brentwood, Clayton, Concord, Danville, El Cerrito, Hercules, Lafayette, Martinez, Moraga, Oakley, Orinda, Pinole, Pittsburg, Pleasant Hill, Richmond, San Pablo, San Ramon and Walnut Creek 1

Independent Special Districts:

Crockett Community Services District, Diablo Community Services District, Discovery Bay Community Services District, Kensington Police Protection and Community Services District, Knightsen Town Community Services District, Kensington Fire Protection District, Moraga-Orinda Fire District, Rodeo-Hercules Fire Protection District, San Ramon Valley Fire Protection District, Los Medanos Community Healthcare District, Mt. Diablo Healthcare District, West Contra Costa County Healthcare District, Byron-Bethany Irrigation District, East Contra Costa Irrigation District, Bethel Island Municipal Improvement District, Ambrose Recreation and Park District, Green Valley Recreation and Park District, Pleasant Hill Recreation and Park District, Rollingwood-Wilart Park Recreation and Park District, Byron Sanitary District, Central Contra Costa Sanitary District, Ironhouse Sanitary District, Mt. View Sanitary District, Rodeo Sanitary District, Stege Sanitary District, West County Wastewater District, Contra Costa Water District and Diablo Water District, Byron-Brentwood-Knightsen Union Cemetery District 1