

Greenville County Council Split on Ethics Debate

A heated debate currently taking place within Greenville County Council has to do with the important issue of ethics and transparency, and it is mostly going unnoticed by the taxpaying public. The outcome is very important to those who hope to benefit financially if the decision goes in their favor and the ethical requirements for serving on Greenville County boards and commissions are eliminated.

The taxpaying public should be interested in promoting ethical government that treats all businesses in the county equally in terms of government contracts. Currently, the proponents for eliminating ethical requirements from members of Greenville County boards and commissions are pressuring council members to eliminate the ethical restrictions. To date, there is no pressure from citizens or businesses that will be victims of the lack of ethical rules.

Current Greenville County policy essentially requires that no business owner or officer can legally serve on a board or commission governing a county agency with which their company has a contract or other financial arrangement. Under the current ethics rule, the owner or operator of a television or radio station or newspaper that receives advertising revenue from the Bi-Lo Center, should not serve on the Auditorium Board that governs operations and contracts with the Bi-Lo Center.

There have been reports that the ordinance has been violated and the county has failed to enforce it. In the meantime owners or officers of other companies currently seeking or already doing contractual business with the county are seeking positions on certain boards and commissions.

In the current environment of rampant fraud and corruption in government nationwide, one would think that Greenville County Council would be racing to enforce their ethics rules. Sadly, that is not the case. A faction of the council is trying desperately to change the ordinance and eliminate the ethical requirement. Their proposed change narrowly failed passage during the last council meeting.

The proponents for eliminating the ethical requirement from boards and commissions argue that there is no prohibition against council members doing business with the county, therefore they should not have a higher ethical standards for members of boards and commissions than exist for council members.

Not many years ago, a paving contractor served on Greenville County Council. During his service, he had a letter from the South Carolina Ethics Commission stating that there was nothing unethical taking place as long as he did not personally vote for the contract. No one has made the case that the State Ethics Commission is ethical in its decisions. It is naïve and virtually stupid to pretend that a member of a governing body does not have influence on the voting of other members. It is that simple. Only those who wish to be deceived will fall for that reasoning.

Should owners or executives of a newspaper, radio or television station serve on the hospital board and receive thousands of dollars in advertising revenue from the system he governs? Should a

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members of the Auditorium Board own a newspaper, radio or television station and receive thousands of dollars in advertising revenue from the Bi-Lo Center? Should a member of any board governing any government agency have a contract or receive any funds for concessions, janitorial supplies or services, security or any other supplies or services from the government agency his board governs?

I think not. It is unfair to businesses who do not benefit from being on the inside and being in a position to influence outcomes.

Voters must hold elected officials accountable for maintaining ethical standards. Boards and commissions appointed by elected officials are out of sight of the voting public and must have oversight or corruption will creep in when unethical people discover the opportunities.

Wake up, people! This issue will come up again. Money talks and it speaks loudly where the light of transparency does not shine.