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**Ethics Matter!**

**Off to the Election Races**

*Advice for successfully navigating the election season*

Come November, voters across the United States will have the opportunity to exercise a fundamental right and responsibility of a democracy. They will elect leaders and determine the way forward on a range of matters affecting local governments and our communities. For local government professionals, the perennial challenge is to balance an interest and right to participate in the process without violating the ethical commitment to political neutrality.

The ICMA Code of Ethics offers sound guidance on common questions and issues that arise during any campaign season.

**Q.** An active nonpartisan grassroots group made up of citizens and business owners regularly invites the city manager and department directors to its events to talk about city issues. As part of the city manager’s civic engagement strategy, staff members usually attend these events. A controversial reduction in services approved by the council to balance the budget has inspired the group to back a coalition of candidates to unseat the incumbents in the upcoming election.

In the midst of the campaign season, the group has extended an invitation to the city manager and select department heads to participate in a “dialogue” about the city’s future. Given the heat of the election, should the manager put staff members on the firing line or get them embroiled in the campaign?

**A.** Staff members are free to meet with a group that has publicly endorsed candidates for city council as long as the purpose of the meeting is not to talk politics. Commenting on the qualifications or contributions of candidates is inappropriate. Although the manager has an ethical obligation to keep the community at large informed about city business, the manager also must judge how best to balance that requirement with keeping the staff insulated from politics.

Some managers place a moratorium on attending events sponsored by politically engaged groups during the campaign season, and some attend along with their staff members but with the clear understanding that they won’t participate in discussions about the candidates.

Q. My college roommate is running for a seat in the U.S. House of Representatives. I made the painful yet correct decision at the beginning of her campaign to refrain from demonstrating any public support for her efforts. Although she is many states away, I just didn’t want to compromise my professional standards by getting involved in politics (especially wise because her party of choice is the minority in my community). If she is successful, can I attend her swearing-in ceremony?

**A.** After the votes have been counted, members are free to attend the various inaugural events at all levels of government. The political process of selecting the candidate is over. What takes place next is simply a public ceremony and transfer of authority.

**Q.** My spouse is adamant that she will be campaigning for the reelection of our U.S. senator. What ethical concerns do I have if she makes a campaign contribution from our joint checking account? Can she place a sign in our yard ... presumably on her half?

**A.** The ICMA Code of Ethics applies only to members; it does not apply to spouses and family members. There are, after all, local government managers and assistants whose spouses hold elected office outside the employing jurisdiction or are otherwise politically engaged. The spouse’s campaign contribution by check or credit card can come from a joint account as long as the spouse signs the check and donation form. The official record of the contribution is based on the actual donor.

Unlike a campaign donation, where it is clear who signed the check, it would not be clear who placed the sign in the yard and who is supporting the candidate. If the sign placement creates the appearance that the member was involved, it opens the door for a complaint. For that reason alone, it should be discouraged. To avoid activity that inadvertently harms the member’s reputation, it would be best to reach agreement in advance on family members’ political activity and level of engagement.

**Q.** City council endorsed a ballot measure to increase the sales tax and dedicate the proceeds to fund libraries, the community center, and recreation amenities. In the wake of reductions in the public safety area, the measure has divided the community along the lines of safety versus services for families and children. What role should the manager play in this debate?

**A.** The ICMA Code of Ethics draws a distinction between activity on behalf of candidates for elected office (is not permitted) and advocacy for issues and ballot measures (is permitted). This distinction makes sense given the professional expertise local government managers and staff contribute to the policy dialogue.

Members may publicly advocate for an issue, make financial contributions to issue-oriented political action committees (PACs), and actively engage in debate and dialogue. But there are cautions to consider before wading in.

Know and comply with the law regarding use of public resources for ballot measures. Consider where the governing body stands on the issue. If it’s not united, a low-profile strategy limited to providing background information on the measure may be wise.

Caution is necessary even if you decide to actively join the debate. Think carefully about the most effective role you can play and what impact your involvement may have on your ability to serve the local government.

The high standard of political neutrality is a bedrock principle of the local government management profession. While regularly debated, this principle enables professionals to function as objective and independent sources of information and advice on local government matters, serve all members of the governing body equally, and contribute to public debate on policy issues.

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