

DEPARTMENTS

Ethics Inquiries

Supporting the School Bond Initiative

The city manager wants to do everything he can to support a local school bond initiative that will appear on the ballot in the next election. After reading Tenet 7 and the guidelines related to it, he still wasn't sure if they applied to a school bond question.

Response

It's always a good idea to think carefully about an impulse to get involved in a political activity, even if the ICMA Code of Ethics does not expressly prohibit that activity. For example, if the city council opposed the school bond initiative, or if the council were divided on the question, most prudent city managers would seek private ways of expressing their support.

The ICMA Code of Ethics prohibits political activities involving candidates for office. When it comes to political issues, the advice changes. For example, there is a guideline on "Presentation of Issues," that states: "Members may assist the governing body in presenting issues involved in referenda such as bond issues, annexations, and similar matters." This advice supports the manager's role in representing the local government's position with state legislatures and with Congress.

But what about a manager's interest in a matter that is not on the council's agenda? Most managers choose to keep a low profile in supporting causes that are important to them personally. They tend to feel comfortable making modest contributions to these causes, or may volunteer their time outside of the regular business day. While the ICMA Code of Ethics is silent on the question of allowing the member's name (but not with the member's title) to appear in a paid advertisement, most members prefer to keep their support private. In general, managers prefer to keep a low profile with issue campaigns, as that is more in keeping with the image they want to protect as a nonpolitical professional.