

# Citizens' guide to standards of conduct for local government officials

*Wisconsin Statutes* establish standards of conduct for all of our state's governmental officials, including local officials. These legal requirements apply to elected and key appointed officials of our state's counties, cities, villages, towns, school boards, and sewerage and other special districts.<sup>1</sup>

**Standards of conduct.** In general, a local public official should not:

- **ACT OFFICIALLY IN A MATTER IN WHICH THE OFFICIAL IS PRIVATELY INTERESTED**
- **USE GOVERNMENT POSITION FOR PRIVATE FINANCIAL BENEFIT**
- **ACCEPT TRANSPORTATION, LODGING, FOOD, BEVERAGES, OR ANYTHING ELSE OF MORE THAN TOKEN VALUE OFFERED BECAUSE THE OFFICIAL HOLDS A GOVERNMENT POSITION**
- **SOLICIT OR ACCEPT REWARDS OR ITEMS OR SERVICES LIKELY TO INFLUENCE THE OFFICIAL**
- **OFFER OR PROVIDE INFLUENCE IN EXCHANGE FOR CAMPAIGN CONTRIBUTIONS**
- **BE FINANCIALLY INTERESTED IN A GOVERNMENT CONTRACT THE VALUE OF WHICH EXCEEDS \$15,000 AND FOR WHICH THE OFFICIAL IS AUTHORIZED TO TAKE SOME DISCRETIONARY ACTION (EVEN IF THE OFFICIAL ABSTAINS)<sup>2</sup>**

**Financial disclosure.** Some local governments make available a list of the employers and financial interests of their government's officials.<sup>3</sup> Most do not. The decision to collect this information is one that the legislature has left to each unit of government. To learn if your county, municipality, or town provides this information, ask your county, municipal, or town clerk.

**Addressing issues before they become problems.** To deal with a conflict between a private interest and governmental responsibilities before an official takes a vote or enters into discussions on a matter, the official can either resolve the matter by relinquishing the private interest or mitigate the problem by temporarily withdrawing from exercise of governmental responsibilities. By seeking advice beforehand, an official can determine whether statutory restrictions permit the official to participate in a matter or to accept items or services of value.

Ordinarily, the legal advisor for the unit of government of which the official's position is a part is in the best position to advise the government official about a matter involving ethical standards of conduct. Sometimes, a statewide association of local governments will advise an official.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> §19.59, *Wisconsin Statutes*.

<sup>2</sup> §946.13, *Wisconsin Statutes*. See text of statutes for exceptions to general rule.

<sup>3</sup> Among the local governments requiring their officials to identify information about their sources of income and investments are the cities of Madison and Milwaukee and the counties of Dane, Milwaukee, and Wood.

<sup>4</sup> Examples include Wisconsin Counties Association, League of Wisconsin Municipalities, Wisconsin Towns Association, Wisconsin Association of School Boards.

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*This is a guide. For authoritative information consult Wisconsin Statutes.*

If, after studying the legal standards and gathering the pertinent facts, the legal counsel is uncertain about what advice to offer, the lawyer may direct a letter to the Wisconsin Government Accountability Board stating the pertinent facts and law, tentative conclusion, and basis for it, and ask that the Wisconsin Government Accountability Board issue an opinion concerning the interpretation of §19.59, the Code of Ethics for Local Government Officials, Employees and Candidates. Written requests for advice are confidential. No member or employee of the Government Accountability Board may make public the identity of anyone requesting an advisory opinion or of persons mentioned in an opinion. Periodically, the Board publishes summaries of its opinions after making sufficient alterations to prevent the identification of the requestor and persons mentioned in the opinions. The *Statutes* do not authorize the Board to issue an opinion to a citizen or to an official or representative of a local government other than the local government's legal counsel.

**Complaints.** If you believe that an official of a county, city, village, town, school board, or special purpose district has violated a standard of conduct that state law requires the official to observe, you may file a complaint with the district attorney for the county in which the activity occurred.

Your complaint should describe the pertinent facts succinctly. State that you swear or affirm that the information you are providing is true to the best of your knowledge, information, and belief. Have a notary or other person authorized to administer an oath witness your signature to the complaint. Deliver the complaint to the district attorney, in person, or by mail, or other appropriate way you find convenient.

Allow the district attorney a reasonable length of time to look into the matter. The district attorney may need several weeks to look into the facts and law in order to make a good decision about how to proceed.

In any event, if the district attorney has not filed a complaint or replied to you within 20 days of your filing a complaint with that office, you may send a copy of your complaint to the Attorney General's Public Integrity Unit<sup>5</sup>, explaining that the district attorney, after considering your complaint for 20 days or more, has not begun an action against the person you complained about, and ask the Attorney General to enforce the complaint. If the Attorney General also declines to prosecute the matter, you will at least have the satisfaction that two law enforcement agencies have had the opportunity to review your complaint and act upon it. The Government Accountability Board cannot overturn the decisions of the district attorney or Attorney General or, independent of them, enforce standards of conduct for local government officials.

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<sup>5</sup> You may file a complaint with the Public Integrity Unit by downloading a form from the Department of Justice's website and mailing it to Administrator Michael Bauer, Wisconsin Department of Justice, Division of Legal Services, 17 West Main Street, P.O. Box 7857, Madison, WI 53707-7857.