

Joseph Ellin's Commentary on "Conflict of Interest Serving on a Government Committee"

Commentary On
Conflict of Interest Serving on a Government Committee

This case is a bit unusual in that the conflict of interest here evidently occurred through trying to comply with state law. The law requires that two seats on the waste planning committee be held by industry representatives, but the two who are appointed, Matthews and Parkinson, are connected with a plan to site the county landfill in Barker township, where the residents charge conflict of interest. It is not clear in what the conflict consists, but presumably the accusation is that Matthews and Parkinson's firms will benefit if the dump is situated in Barker.

Conflict of interest is easy to charge and hard to disprove. Often it seems that appearance of conflict amounts to nothing more than someone saying that there is such a conflict. Since passions about things like landfills are apt to become intense, it is politically foolish, even if not necessarily ethically objectionable, for anyone to sit on a planning board where even the whisper of conflict of interest is possible. There must be other industry representatives who don't have proposals before the County Waste Board. Neither Matthews nor Parkinson want to resign. They seem to have made it a point of personal pride not to succumb to pressure which they consider unjustified. But it is a mistake to allow one's sense of honor to stand in the way of getting the task done. These accusations will poison the board's deliberations and cause the decision to drag on forever. Neither Matthews nor Parkinson should serve on the board. They have made their defense, which is their right, and they need not admit any culpability. Now they should resign for the public good.