

DNR Case 3. Offering Professional Advice as a Public Sector Engineer

An engineer has a PE license from Illinois with 15 years of experience with a consulting firm there, but he has recently moved back home to Smalltown, WI: he has left a higher-paying job with a higher level of responsibility, but he has made this sacrifice for family reasons. His job prospects near Smalltown are limited, but he lands a position with the Wisconsin DNR as a field engineer in that region of the state.

After a couple of months working closely with others at the DNR, he is directed to hold a meeting with the superintendent and consultants at a somewhat remote, small public water utility to discuss a new well site for the small municipality in that region. It is the first meeting he has been asked to run as the sole representative from the DNR. He enjoys having the freedom to run his own meeting, and he feels he is now well-versed in the regulatory challenges of the region.

But this engineer has some personality quirks: he prides himself on over-preparing for meetings, in part because he knows that people expect the person running the meeting to do the most talking. He has found that he is most comfortable when he is the most knowledgeable person in the room. Particularly since his move to Smalltown and the shift in his role, he has sometimes felt the desire to prove that he has much more expertise than his current job title really reflects. So he throws himself into preparing for this meeting: he analyzes as much available data as he can find, studying the proposed well site and reviewing the hydrology and geological features for other possible sites in the area.

The meeting itself goes well enough, but the DNR engineer finds himself increasingly exasperated with the claims made by the consultants for this public water utility: they seem to be operating with a very biased view of their options. He wonders why their view of the situation is so narrow. They don't seem to understand the variety of options that they have and the challenges associated with those options. Toward the end of the meeting, he finally tells them: "Look, this is completely off the record: I'm not telling you this as a representative with the DNR, but this is my advice to you as a professional engineer." Then he goes over several different options they have and offers his analysis of the costs and benefits of each option based on his research into the geology and water table of the region, ultimately recommending that they should consider putting in a well in a completely different location than they had originally planned. They take notes and thank him profusely for his advice.

Later, when he writes up the formal meeting minutes for his files at the DNR, he describes the options that they are considering, but he decides not to mention that he has provided detailed recommendations.

What potentially negative consequences for this engineer can you imagine?

**Do you think this is an ethics challenge, or is it just a project management challenge?
Could it be both?**

What could he have done differently, once he realized that these consultants needed to be better informed?

Does it change the ethical implications of this situation dramatically if this engineer were to offer his advice to the superintendent of this water utility as part of a personal conversation held offsite and after hours?

While he is working as a field engineer for the Wisconsin DNR, could he at the same time accept a consultant's fee to offer his engineering opinions to the superintendent of the water utility, let's say in the role of a third-party engineering reviewer?