

STATEMENT ON THE 2021 PROPOSED COUNTY ETHICS CODE

The League of Women Voters of Westchester has been invited by the County Board of Ethics to comment on a revised County Ethics Code.

In 2013 the Westchester County Charter Revision Commission recognized the need for a re-examination of the existing County Ethics Code. In doing so, it described an effective local government code of ethics as one that would be simple, comprehensive, and comprehensible; that would require sensible disclosure on the part of a wide range of elected, employed, and volunteer county officials; and that would be “administered by an independent ethics board with full authority to interpret and enforce the ethics law for every public official who is subject to it.”

At the LWVW annual Convention on June 3, 2021, keynote speaker County Attorney John Nonna presented an overview of the 2021 revision to our attending members based upon a PowerPoint summary previously circulated to attendees. Subsequently, the LWVW County Government Committee conducted a review of the 2021 revision in its entirety and came to the following conclusions.

We wholeheartedly endorse this sensible document, and thank the County leadership for its thorough examination and expansion of the existing County Ethics Code. The 2021 document reflects the complexity of our society, taking into account Westchester’s increased diversity, and making public officials responsible for recognizing that complexity and diversity. It also recognizes the inherent honesty of most public officials, seeks to guide them, and focuses on prevention of any possible wrongdoing.

In this revision there are some issues that either were never addressed in the previous code or were only very lightly touched on. For instance, using detailed language it prohibits nepotism in any way. It prohibits the use of a county employee’s position to solicit funds (such as campaign funds) or to influence the awarding of contracts. It mandates once-a-quarter meetings of the Board of Ethics to ensure prompt review of possible issues, and provides whistleblower protections. It provides for initial and on-going ethics training as well as the creation of a written ethics guide for all county employees, whether full-time or independent contractors. It requires annual financial disclosures by holders of a comprehensive range of specified positions, full-time, part-time, and volunteer.

This revision importantly changes the make-up of the Board of Ethics, which formerly had been appointed solely by the County Executive. Now, of its seven members, five will be appointed for five-year staggered terms by the County Executive and two for two-year staggered terms by the Chair of the Board of Legislators, with one of those being an elected or appointed officer or employee of the County. This changes the relationship between the County Executive and the Board of Legislators. Therefore, the proposed Ethics Code revision will be a proposition on the ballot November 2021. Voter education is a must. The League of Women Voters of Westchester will endeavor to assist with that.

Kathy Meany
LWVW President

LWVW County Government Committee
September 2, 2021