

PD 4/6/2011

Cuyahoga County Council passes sweeping ethics rules

HARLAN SPECTOR
Plain Dealer Reporter

The Cuyahoga County Council delivered on a key promise of county reform on Tuesday by passing a far-reaching ethics law that regulates the conduct of employees, contractors, lobbyists and appointees to boards and commissions.

The ordinance forbids the hiring of relatives, requires county officials and employees to disclose potential conflicts of interest and requires staff members and those doing business with the county to sign ethics statements. Contractors and lobbyists must register with the inspector general, a newly created po-

sition, and they are forbidden from giving anything of value to employees or from making campaign contributions.

The law has been in the works since the new council took office this year amid a sweeping county corruption scandal that has netted convictions of more than 50 contractors and public officials. This is much broader than the ethics policy that had been in place under the previous county commissioners.

"I think this is the most comprehensive ethics ordinance in the state," said Republican Councilman Dave Greenspan, who led the effort as chairman of the council's ethics committee.

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Greenspan said the most critical component of the law is a requirement that employees, contractors and lobbyists undergo ethics training.

The Ohio Ethics Commission, which reviewed the ordinance, wrote in a letter Friday that it provides "a solid foundation" as council moves forward with restoring and rebuilding integrity and confidence in county government.

The council's 10-0 passage followed a dust-up between Council President C. Ellen Connolly and County Executive Ed FitzGerald over the role of the inspector general. FitzGerald appointed former federal prosecutor Nailah Byrd to the post, but her duties have yet to be defined by a council ordinance.

Connolly protested a provision calling for the inspector general to report possible ethics-code violations to outside agencies, saying, "We don't

know what this person is going to do."

"It could cost the constitutional rights and rights of privacy of the citizens," Connolly said. "I have real concerns about this. We have got to set up this department."

FitzGerald objected to the suggestion that council doesn't know what Byrd is doing, and he challenged Connolly whether she has asked the administration.

Janice Patterson, a member of the county transition advisory panel on ethics, asked the council to hold off on the ordinance until the inspector general duties are defined. Patterson also said dozens of amendments offered Tuesday should undergo review before passage.

After the meeting, Patterson said she was pleased overall.

"The bottom line is it's a wonderful thing for the county that we have a comprehensive ethics policy," she said. "We got almost everything in it we hoped we would see."

To reach this Plain Dealer reporter: hspector@plaind.com, 216-999-4543

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Area's water still a bargain

ALAN A. A. SEIFULLAH

Folks around here love to beat Pittsburgh in football, although that hasn't occurred much lately. But there is one thing in which we have historically beaten Pittsburgh and many other cities by quite a wide margin — the affordability of water.

The average household in Cleveland uses about 2,000 cubic feet of water every three months. The cost is about \$46, and slightly higher in our suburbs. The same usage of water in Pittsburgh cost a homeowner there nearly \$120 every three months, or about triple what a Cleveland homeowner pays. And if Cleveland rates go up by the amount the Cleveland Water Department is proposing, the cost of water still will be considerably less than in Pittsburgh.

In fact, with the proposed change in our rate structure, the Cleveland Water Department will continue to be more affordable than water service in most cities in the Great Lakes region. That's an important fact that has yet to bubble to the surface in present conversations about the proposed rate increase.

Our costs also would rank among the bottom half of all the cities in the United States. We're currently lower than Chicago; Columbus; Cincinnati; Philadelphia; Boston; Minneapolis; Indianapolis; Baltimore; St. Louis; Washington, D.C.; and Buffalo, N.Y. If our rates go up as proposed, we still will have lower water

costs than the majority of those communities pay today.

That's not to say that we take rate increases lightly. We know that in this economy any increase in price can be a challenge for our customers. However, the cost of not moving forward may lead to increased costs to maintain the system that the Cleveland Water Department could not afford to bear.

Approximately 80 percent of the Water Department's costs are fixed, meaning its costs are in the infrastructure and delivery system. Built in 1856, the Cleveland Water Department is also one of the oldest water systems in the United States; therefore, it requires ongoing maintenance and upgrades. These costs continue to rise as the costs of materials and labor continue to rise.

The rate increase proposed by the water department is the result of a comprehensive rate assessment conducted for the city by the Municipal and Financial Services Group, an independent consulting firm that has done similar studies for several other municipalities. The proposed new rates are designed to be equitable and practical and to allow the Cleveland Water Department to cover the increasing costs of water services provided to its customers.

And the new rate structure will create a stronger business model for the Cleveland Water Department. Historically, the department has generated most of its revenue based on water consumption. By mov-

ing to a flat-service delivery fee as a primary source of revenue, the Cleveland Water Department will be creating a more sustainable rate structure and enhancing its financial health in an environment where water conservation is becoming increasingly important.

As I read the comments of some of the bloggers who have threatened to move away from Greater Cleveland if water rates are increased, I wondered where they would go? Certainly not to the Southeast or Southwest where they are worried about the future availability of the water that some transport from great distances at great costs. The truth is that you can find some communities with lower-cost water than Cleveland — but not many.

We have a great asset in Cleveland's water. It is safe, great tasting and always there when we turn on the tap. While no one likes to see prices increase, Cleveland water will still be a bargain.

Just ask the residents of Pittsburgh.

Seifullah is head of communications for the Cleveland Department of Public Utilities, which includes the Cleveland Water Department.