

Ethics Committee 2021/2022 Annual Report

Overview

The Ethics Committee met six times during the 2021/2022 term. All meetings were held in compliance with the MD Open Meeting Act, with agendas published before each meeting in the Village Weekly Wrap-up and posted on the Village calendar. Detailed minutes for each meeting are available for review on the Ethics page of the VMA website.

The Ethics Committee voted unanimously to publish a year-end report, which is divided into five categories consistent with the Committee's core responsibilities as follows:

Ethics Complaints

- The Committee did not receive any ethics complaints.

Review of Conflict Interest Questionnaires and Oaths of Office

- Consistent with the Village Ethics Code, the Committee reviewed COI questionnaires and Oath of Offices from all members of the Council, Election Committee, Ethics Committee, the Village Tree Supervisor, and all Village employees.
- No conflicts of interest were reported.
- The Committee reported to the Council that one volunteer, who had not executed any official duties, did not complete the COI questionnaire or Oath of Office.
- To address the numerous omissions identified during the document review, the Committee redesigned the Village Conflict of Interest Questionnaire and presented the updated form to the Council for approval.

Advisory Opinions

- The Committee did not receive any requests for advisory opinions.

Ethics Training

- The Committee developed an ethics training program for all Village Public Officials subject to Code's ethics requirements.
- Three members of the Ethics Committee conducted an ethics training session for all members of the Election Committee.

Review the Existing Ethics Ordinance and Committee Policies and Make Recommendations to the Village Council to Ensure Adherence to Best Practices.

- The Committee recommended that the Council consider amending the Village Code to establish staggered terms for Ethics Committee members. Based on the Committee's recommendation, the Council instructed the Village attorney to draft a staggered term amendment to the Village Code. A public hearing and possible adoption of the amendment are scheduled for the June 2022 Council meeting.
- Following up on resident concerns raised at the end of the Committee's 2020/2021 term, the Committee considered whether to recommend an amendment to the Village Code prohibiting Council Members from endorsing candidates during Village elections. After

an extensive review of relevant Maryland ethics laws, the Committee voted unanimously against making any recommendation.

- The Committee worked with the Village Manager and Village IT consultant to establish a confidential ethics email account to ensure the confidentiality protections mandated by the Village Ethics Code. The Committee updated its email policy to include procedures governing the use of the confidential account.
- The Committee created an SOP for reviewing COI questionnaires and Oath of Offices.

Conclusion

The issuance of this year-end summary detailing Committee actions is intended to reinforce public confidence that Village Officials and employees are executing their official duties with impartiality and an absence of conflict of interest.

Of note, since the adoption of the expanded ethics ordinance in 2021, there has been no increase in the number of ethics complaints received by the Committee. Similarly, the ordinance's passing appears to have had no negative impact on residents' willingness to volunteer, as the Village has experienced an increase in the number of residents volunteering for Committees and running for Council.