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Reaching for the ethics summit

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PROVIDED

It's been a few weeks since the Ethics Summit. It was a well-attended, informative and enjoyable event. You might wonder, who sponsors the summit? Why even have something called the Ethics Summit? What's its purpose? Why should anyone care?

Who's the Sponsor?

To answer that first question, the Ethics Summit is a project of the Shared Ethics Advisory Commission (SEAC), which has hosted 13 annual Summits. SEAC is an all-volunteer association committed to providing ethics training to local government employees of any Northwest Indiana community that elects to participate. Currently there are 23 member towns, cities and counties. SEAC also hosts specialized ethics training for department heads and managers (emphasis on leadership and example-setting skills) and for private citizens serving on boards and commissions (emphasis on recognizing and avoiding conflicts of interest). In addition to these training

programs, SEAC asks candidates for local offices to sign an ethics pledge by which they promise to provide ethics training and support for effective whistleblower policies.

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What's the Summit's Purpose?

The Summit is offered free of charge to the entire community — government employees, elected officials, business and community leaders and concerned citizens. People from 21 different communities attended. The purpose of the summit is to heighten awareness of local government ethics. The program starts with a keynote speaker, this year Deborah Witzburg, the inspector general for the City of Chicago. (Imagine the ethics issues she has seen!) Over the years, a wide variety of prominent people have been the keynote speaker, bringing their own perspective on local government ethics and public policy.

After the keynote speaker, the summit program engages all attendees (usually about 200 people) to analyze brief case studies that involve realistic scenarios that public employees might encounter in their daily work. Each table identifies the ethics issues in their case and then reports to the whole audience on their findings. There is always an active dialogue. The entire summit is a teaching experience, helping participants recognize ethics issues not always immediately obvious, the "gray" areas where a person might inadvertently slip into unethical behavior.

Why Should Anyone Care

If you have read this far, I hope the answer is obvious. Everyone should care about local government conducting its activities in an efficient and ethical manner. The overwhelming majority of public employees want to do the right thing in the right way, but it is not always easy to know if, for example, whether a gift from a vendor is acceptable. Much gray area exists between a small box of candy at holiday times and an expensive dinner at a fancy restaurant. Everyone needs help in thinking through each situation they may experience. Ethics training (including the case studies at the summit) provides the frame of reference and just like with safety training, people need to refresh their knowledge on a regular basis.

Next Year. SEAC will again host the Ethics Summit next fall, probably in late October. I hope you are intrigued enough to join us. Many people come every year. Maybe you will become one of them.

Calvin Bellamy, a lifelong resident of Northwest Indiana, is a retired banker and attorney and currently is SEAC's President Emeritus. The opinions are the writer's.