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ALERT FEATURED TOP STORY

Davich: This is why 'ethics' should join you in the voting booth this election

Oct 23, 2024

By Jerry Davich

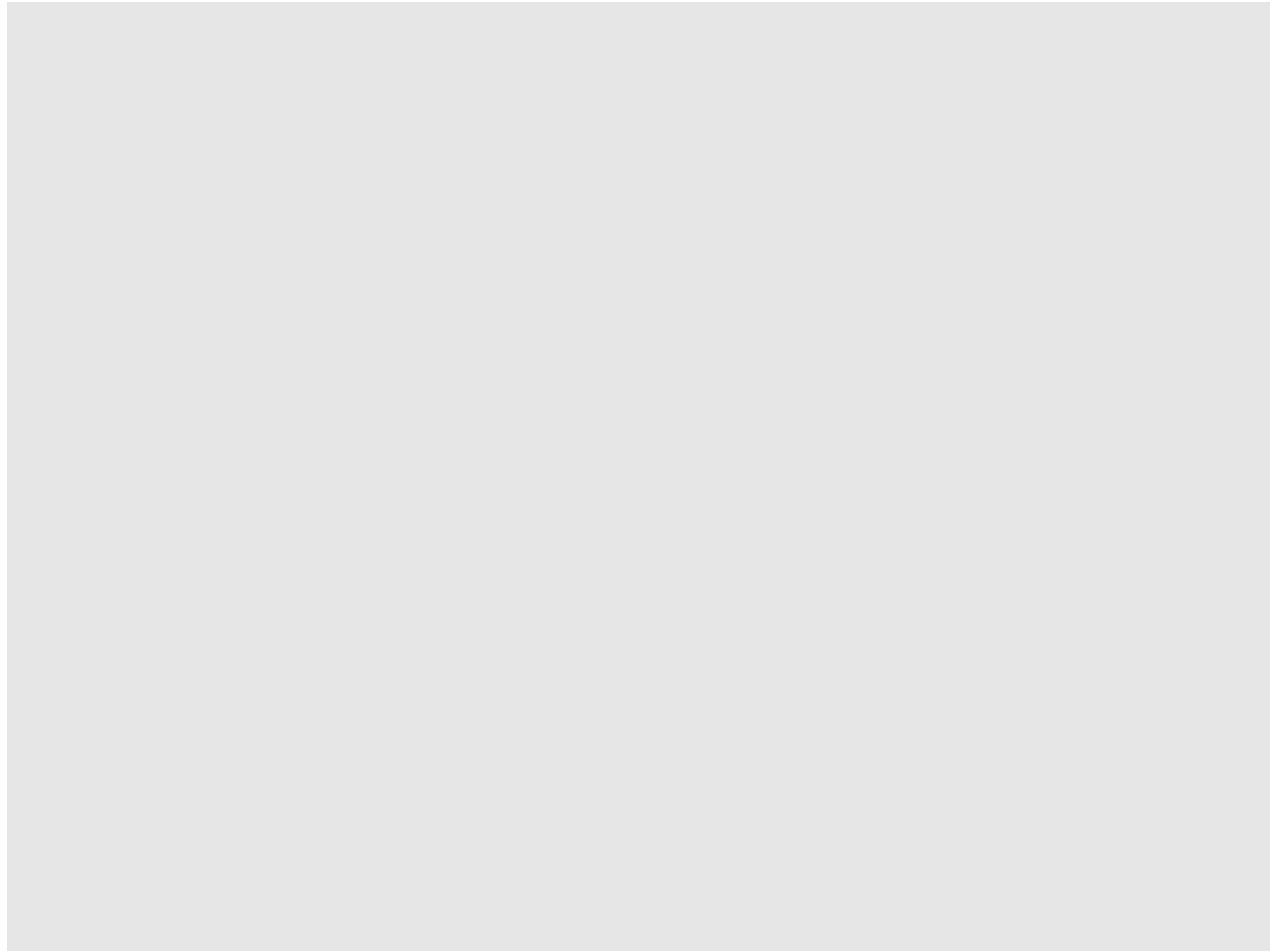
Metro columnist

How do you define the word “ethics”?

My dictionary defines it as a branch of philosophy dealing in respect to the rightness and wrongness of certain actions.

Life is a complex jumble of daily decisions that come with rewards, regrets and unforeseen consequences. Ethics can play a role in our efforts to do the right thing, not the wrong thing.





Indiana Supreme Court Justice Robert Rucker presided over a civil case at the Theodore Roosevelt College & Career Academy in 2017.

John J. Watkins, The Times

“If you have to ask what you’re doing is wrong ... it probably is,” said former Indiana Supreme Court Justice Robert D. Rucker.

The Gary native said this as keynote speaker at the Northwest Indiana Ethics Summit in 2015, hosted by the Shared Ethics Advisory Commission. Until I attended that event, the concept of ethics was something I didn’t give much thought. And if I did, it focused on the questionable decisions of public officials in positions of power, not the rest of us.

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“There’s no air-tight definition,” Rucker told me. “But we know it when we see it.”

We also know it when we *feel* it. And there’s the rub when it comes to our personal ethics. Many of us continue to make wrong decisions although we know they’re wrong. You could say we’re ethically challenged.

My favorite definition of ethics is the simplest: Do the right thing when no one is watching and there is no risk or reward. No praise or punishment. No public adulation or personal guilt.

During each election season in Northwest Indiana, the Shared Ethics Advisory Commission asks all candidates to sign a Candidate Ethics Action Pledge, which asks candidates to provide ethics training for their employees and to support policies protecting whistleblowers.


Matt Rourke, Associated Press

Using this description as a measuring stick, do you consider yourself an ethical person? I can't help but wonder how many of our public office leaders live up to that definition on a daily basis, including many who are currently running for office and campaigning for votes.

Demonstrating ethics in public office can simply mean doing your job without corrupting the office you've been elected to hold. When voters go to the polls, it's their best opportunity to vote for, or against, public office holders or candidates whose ethics are questionable or non-existent.

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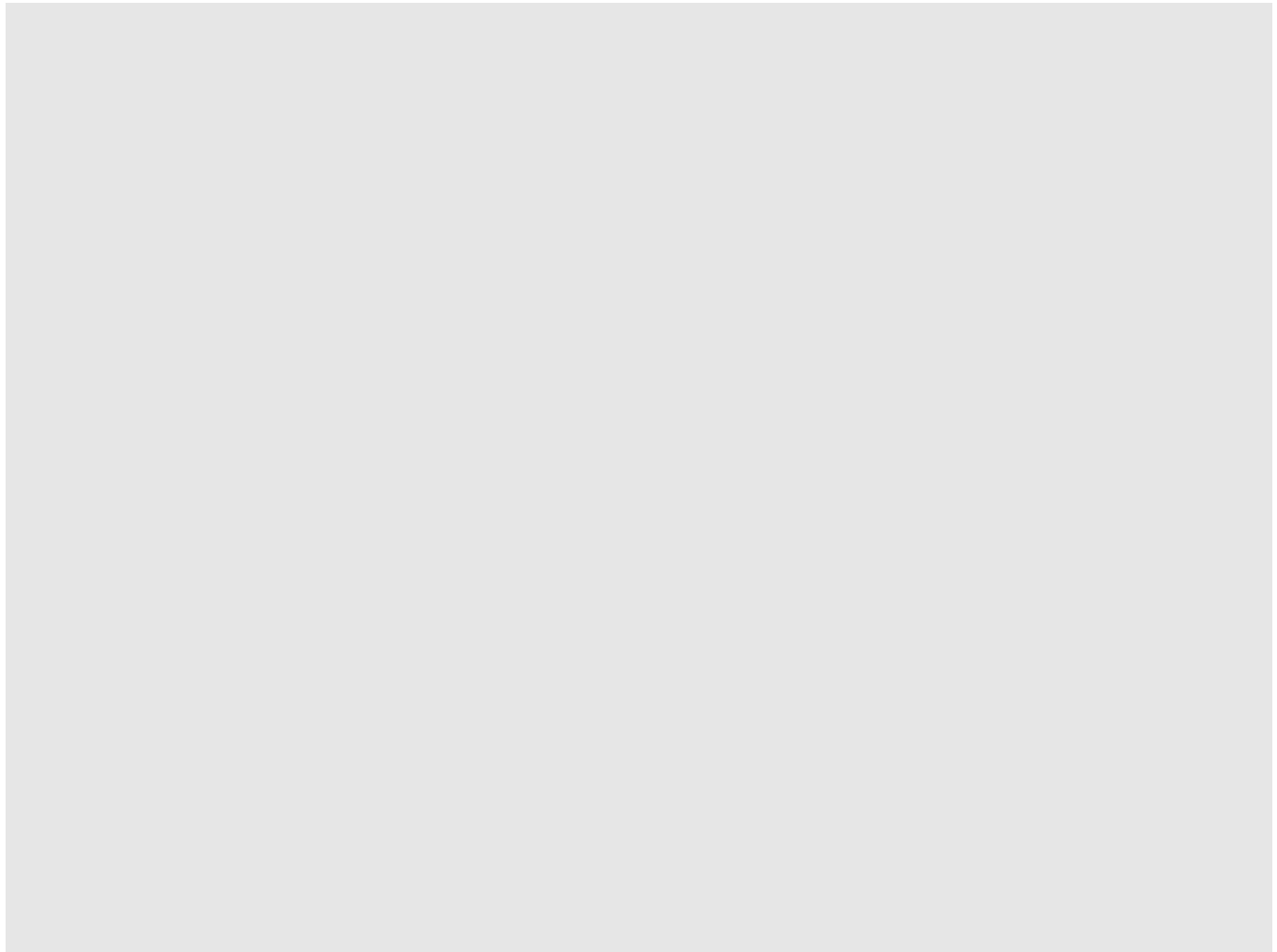
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The SEAC, founded in 2005, represents local cities and towns in Lake, Porter and LaPorte counties, currently at 23 member municipalities. On Thursday morning, the commission will host the 2024 Ethics Summit at Avalon Manor in Merrillville, featuring keynote speaker Deborah Witzburg, inspector general of the city of Chicago, and concluding with a group discussion of relevant ethics case studies.

When Rucker served as keynote speaker, he admitted he was intimidated by the mere "notion of ethics."

The 1976 Valparaiso University graduate served as a Lake County deputy prosecutor before being appointed as an Indiana Supreme Court justice in 1999. If someone so accomplished like Rucker struggled to explain ethics, you could imagine the degree of

difficulty for most people, including me.



"When you vote, we hope you will consider ethical government as one of your reasons for selecting a candidate," SEAC President Courtney Smith wrote.

Elise Amendola, Associated Press

It's not always as simple as right versus wrong. It can also be right versus right, illustrated in shades of gray such as justice versus mercy, truth versus duty, and short-term good versus long-term good.

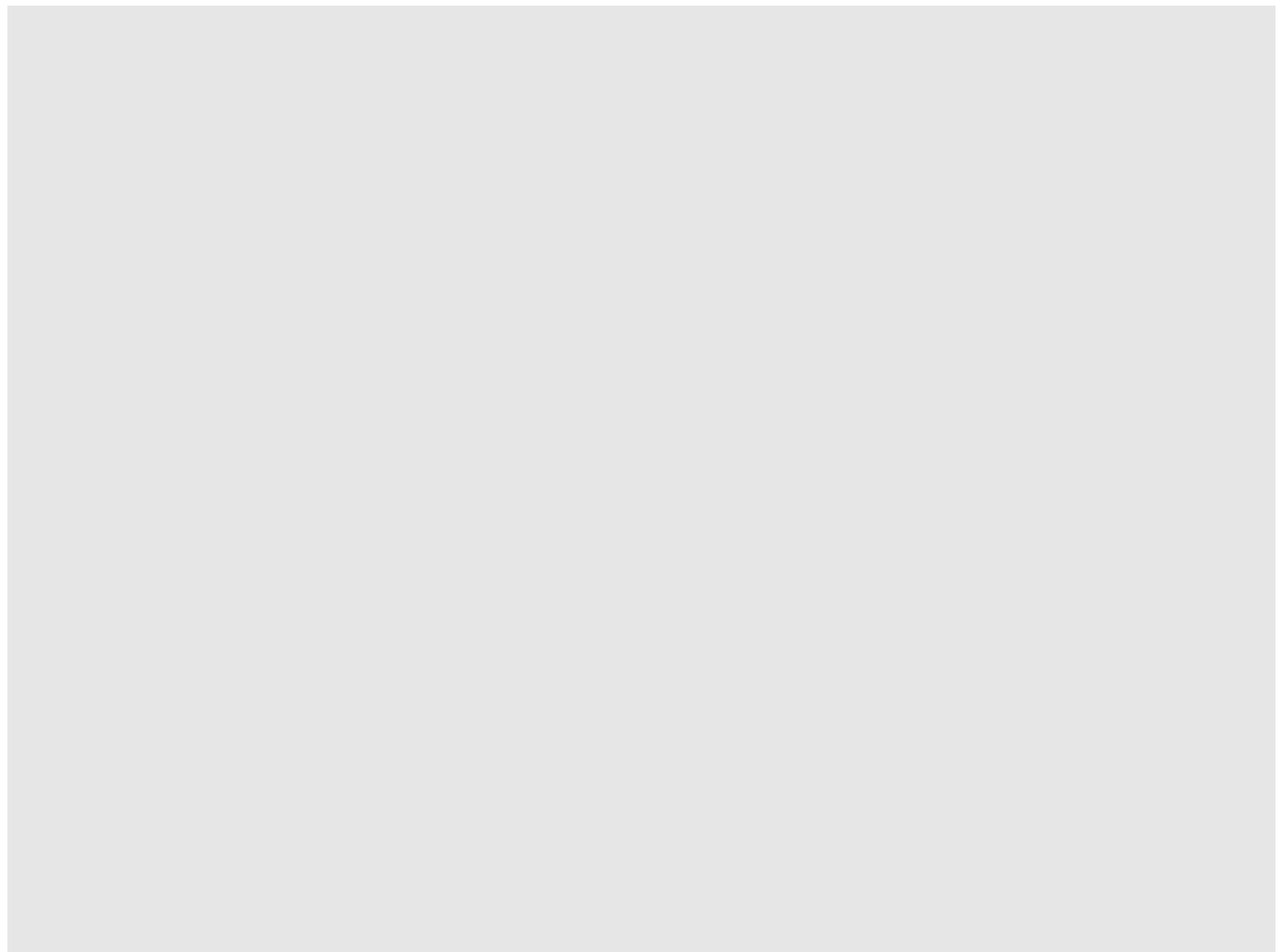
"Which side trumps the other?" Rucker asked rhetorically.

All of us struggle to make the right decision, or at least the one that helps us sleep better that night. Morality plays a role, but there is a key difference between the two. Ethics tend to involve external sources and dilemmas. Morals are based more on personal principles.

“When you vote, we hope you will consider ethical government as one of your reasons for selecting a candidate,” SEAC President Courtney Smith wrote.

Past president Cal Bellamy often preached about a “culture of ethics” in Northwest Indiana, with citizens playing a role in the process by encouraging their political leaders to support ethical training and to sign the pledge. I understand that it won’t prevent or persuade public office holders to do the right thing every time, but it could plant the seed of promise in their mind.

For this year’s general election candidates, the commission lists its ethics pledge statistics. For Lake County public offices, six of the seven candidates have signed the pledge. For Porter County, 14 of the 17 candidates have signed it. For LaPorte County, 15 of the 29 candidates have signed it.



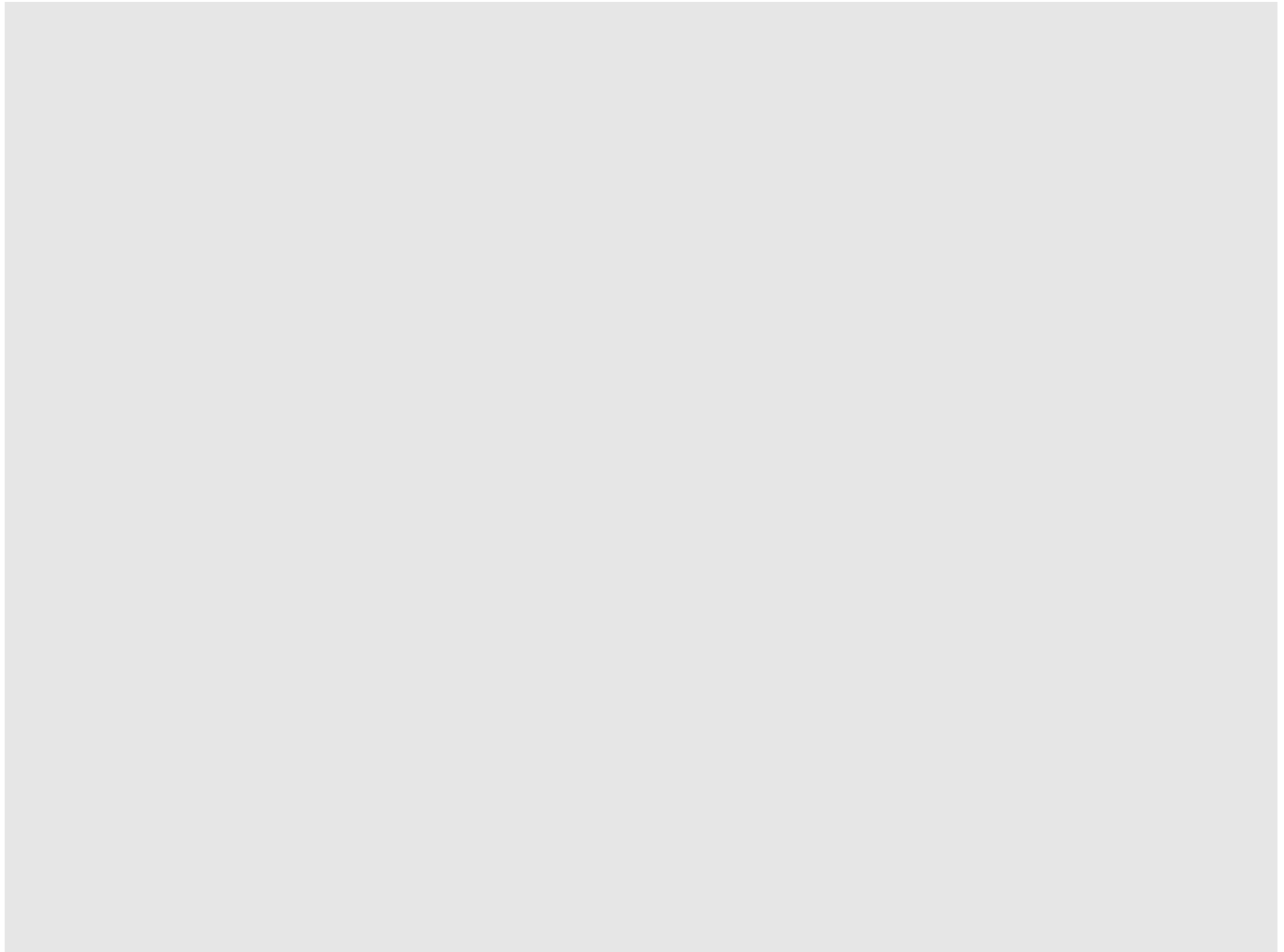
A voter waits in the doorway for a voting booth as another voter completes his ballot at Boot City Opry on Nov. 3, 2020, near Terre Haute, Ind.

Joseph C. Garza, The Tribune-Star

This is why the term “shared ethics” should mean something to all of us. It’s a joint effort. It’s a partnership. And it’s a challenge that we must issue to our public officeholders, as well as to ourselves.

Keep this in mind when you’re all alone in the voting booth to choose who should have the privilege of representing their community or their country: Would they do the right thing when no one is watching?

GALLERY: The Times Photos of the Week



Maggie Willis ties a purple ribbon to a tree before a rally for Domestic Violence Awareness Month in Valparaiso.

John J. Watkins, The Times