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COE admonishes politicians

The Miami-Dade Commission on Ethics and Public Trust (COE) has issued a Letter of Reprimand to former Homestead Mayor Steven Bateman, who last month settled a complaint (**C 13-50**) that he violated the Conflict of Interest and Code of Ethics Ordinance by accepting a round-trip flight on a private jet without disclosing it as a gift. The Letter notes that Bateman had been an elected official for more than a decade and had filed numerous gift disclosure forms, demonstrating his awareness of the requirement. It asserts that “Bateman eroded the trust placed in him by [the citizens of Homestead] when he accepted travel on a private aircraft paid for by DMC (Dade Medical College) and did not disclose it.” It also states that at the time of the flight, his wife, Donna Bateman, was earning \$5,000 a month as a consultant to DMC, so the then-mayor’s “finances were clearly intertwined with an entity which has an interest in favorable treatment by the City of Homestead.” As part of the settlement, Bateman also paid a fine of \$500.

Ethics Commissioners also approved a Letter of Reprimand yesterday for North Miami Councilwoman Marie Steril who previously settled a complaint (**C 14-19**) that she exploited her official position by demanding her mother receive upgrades when she bought a home through a federally-funded program run by the city. The Letter states that “This abuse of power demonstrated Steril’s arrogance as a public officeholder... [placing] her own personal and family interests ahead of those of her constituents. In doing so, Steril betrayed the trust that the citizens of North Miami placed in her when they elected her to office.” In addition to accepting the Reprimand, Steril is paying nearly \$5,000 in restitution to the City of North Miami and \$500 in investigative costs to the Ethics Commission.

The Ethics Commission issued a Letter of Instruction regarding complaints (**C 14-37 and C 14-47**) filed against two members of the Miami-Dade County Taxi Advisory Group (TAG) who failed to file financial disclosure statements for two years. Since the status of the TAG changed to an official advisory committee in 2012 triggering the disclosure requirement, but the members were not advised to do so, the COE dismissed the complaints last month. The Letter, addressed to Diego Feliciano and Les Eisenberg, instructs them to file financial disclosure forms. It also advises the County’s Regulatory and Economic Resources Department, which coordinates the TAG, to inform all members of the requirement.

In response to Request for Opinion (**RQO 14-04**), the Ethics Commission clarified what is meant by “special compensation” when it concerns lobbying on behalf of not-for-profit organizations. The Conflict of Interest and Code of Ethics Ordinance states that those who advocate for a grant on behalf of a non-profit “without special compensation or reimbursement” are not required to register as a lobbyist and those who express support or opposition to an item on behalf of a non-profit “without special compensation or reimbursement” must register as a lobbyist, but are not required to pay the registration fee. The COE determined that refers to payment that is *different from or in addition to* regular wages.

The members of the Ethics Commission offered a tribute to one of the Commission's original members, Charles Hall, who passed away November 20, 2014. The Commission reviewed the life accomplishments of Mr. Hall, a labor relations leader, and requested a moment of silence in his memory.

The Ethics Commission recognized the service of one of COE's first investigators, Manuel W. Diaz, who will be retiring December 24th after 14 years with the agency. Executive Director Joe Centorino recognized Diaz, who had previously achieved the rank of Major with the City of Miami Police Department, and Assistant Chief with the City of Miami Beach Police Department, as "a person of integrity and ability."

The Ethics Commission was created in 1996 as an independent agency with advisory and quasi-judicial powers. It is composed of five members, serving staggered terms of four years each. Through a program of education, outreach and enforcement, the Commission seeks to empower the community and bolster public trust.

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