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Free — but at a cost

The Miami Herald Editorial
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While the rest of us are either ponying up the bucks to attend some of the glam events in town, or sitting it out, many politicians are scoring tickets for free, doling them out to favored friends, relatives and, more troubling, well-connected folks who can, say, get out the vote when election day rolls around.

Such a deal!

But a report from the Miami-Dade County Commission on Ethics and Public Trust makes clear that, for most of these elected officials' constituents, it's a raw deal. It erodes any sense of the public trust in elected officials who appear to be using their positions for personal gain. It's legal, but it stinks. On Thursday, the Ethics Commission will hold a hearing seeking input from city attorneys, officeholders and others before issuing its recommendations for cleaning up the messy details of such give-aways.

The goal is not necessarily to stop the practice of free tickets being dispersed, nor does it have to be. Why not let a nonpolitical government entity, such as the clerk's office, give out the tickets — first come, first served? The real goal is to remove politicians' sticky little fingers from the process. But in some cities, free tickets are written into the contracts between the city and the event presenter, often for the use of a public facility or public subsidy.

Some officials, protesting too much, perhaps, say that they give those complimentary tickets to the needy, the vulnerable, those who could never afford to go to the symphony or the Burger Bash. Sounds good in theory.

But last fall, the Ethics Commission began looking at local ticket policies after helping prosecutors investigate allegations that Miami Beach administrators withheld a \$15-million reimbursement grant from the New World Symphony in an attempt to demand — demand! — tickets to its new Frank Gehry-designed headquarters.

Ultimately, the Ethics Commission's recommendations will be just that — guidelines for municipalities to accept, or ignore. But if elected officials truly believe that these complimentary tickets are for the public's benefit — and they really are concerned about the appearance, and reality, of integrity — then they will seriously take action and follow the example set by their peers in Coral Gables.

According to the Ethics Commission, Gables politicians are not even part of the freebie ticket process. Event presenters, who want to give away complimentary tickets, send them directly to the organization of their choice, usually a nonprofit.

What could be simpler — or have more integrity?

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