

10/29/11 The MIAMI HERALD

To fight corruption: Enforce a public morality

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Prohibition, the newest documentary by acclaimed filmmaker Ken Burns, illustrates the pitfalls inherent in government's attempts to control human behavior. As voiced by historians and personal witnesses in the PBS program, efforts to legislate morality by banning the production and consumption of alcoholic drinks resulted in unintended consequences many considered much worse than the evils of liquor.

Some blame the 18th Amendment to our Constitution for the expansion and strengthening of criminal organizations and tolerance for the breaking of a law considered impossible to enforce. Can we apply the same criticism to laws governing the ethics of public officials?

There is a big difference between the two. Prohibition was a futile attempt to regulate a commonly accepted vice. With ethics laws we try to deter behavior that inhibits good government or leads to pub-

lic corruption, goals that are largely supported by the general public. And while the application of ethics laws may be difficult, enforcement efforts are not routinely ignored or openly flouted.

Nonetheless, as with Prohibition, we have to find a way to navigate between opposing tides, hoping for a better outcome than that lost cause.

In the business world, we advise entrepreneurs to "network" and pursue connections that will increase sales and profits. But it is a violation of government ethics if an official uses a political office for private profit.

We encourage citizens to actively participate in the political process. But we require public disclosure of campaign contributions in an attempt to ensure that some participants don't receive special favors.

We want our political leaders to find common ground with each other to make effective policy choices. But, we want their constituents to witness those negotiations in the "sunshine" to determine if the compromises are in their best interests.

The Miami-Dade Commission on Ethics and Public Trust was created in response to a public demand to "clean up" local

government. But, just as the federal government could not eliminate the craving for a cocktail, neither can we legislate corruption out of existence. We do not have jurisdiction over any individual's private morality. Instead, it is our duty to enforce a public morality.

We strive to create and enforce reasonable rules that public employees, advisory board members, elected officials and government vendors can follow. Our agency puts a great deal of emphasis on training so that public servants may know in advance where to draw the line between right and wrong, especially in gray areas.

Our legal staff is eager to provide advisory opinions that guide officials in complex situations. But if those services are not utilized, our investigators will use decades of law enforcement training and subpoena power to prove wrongdoing.

The independently appointed volunteers who serve as Ethics Commissioners determine liability and mete out punishment. Those who believe monetary fines and letters of reprimand aren't strong enough penalties for non-criminal offenses haven't seen the efforts taken by many public officials to avoid being tainted by an ethics violation. And for more serious

TO REPORT VIOLATIONS

To learn more about the Ethics Commission, visit miamidadeethics.com. If you have a general question about the Conflict of Interest and Code of Ethics Ordinance, or to report ethics violations in Miami-Dade County government or any of its municipalities, call the Ethics Hotline at 786-314-9560 or e-mail ethics@miamidade.gov.

offenders, we have an active investigative partnership with law enforcement agencies that may pursue criminal charges.

We set boundaries so that those serving in or doing business with government understand what is acceptable behavior. The goal is greater integrity in our civic institutions and an improved public perception of government.

And we have already lasted longer than Prohibition.

Joseph Centorino is the executive director of the Miami-Dade Commission on Ethics and Public Trust.



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