

Completed ethics code deserves heartfelt 'Amen'

Our stand: Carefully worded document provides a way to rebuild public trust

Here's a suggestion for Scottsdale City Council members who want to rebuild trust with the public:

Enthusiastically applaud and quickly vote to adopt the ethics code a task force will present early next month.

"It's a comprehensive document," says Scottsdale Community College President Art DeCabooter, who chaired the council-appointed task force. "It's stringent, for sure."



ART DECABOOTER



"It exceeded my expectations," says Jim Derouin, the lawyer who got a cold reception from some council members when he proposed an ethics code last spring.

Derouin's interest in a code flows from his belief that too many Scottsdale leaders over the decades have come into office expecting to make a buck.

"I want to change that mentality of entitlement and establish an expectation of public service on behalf of the people," he says.

Among key provisions:

■ Before joining their first meeting, city officials would be required to read the ethics code and sign a statement agreeing to comply with it.

■ City officials would receive public-service ethics training within 30 days of being sworn into office. Employees would get the training within 90 days.

■ Officials would be required to file a form whenever a conflict of interest arose and refrain from participating in the decision-making process, which the code notes is "broader than just voting and includes being involved with any aspects of any decisions the City makes, such as contracting, sales, purchases, permitting, and zoning."

In other words, a council member could not guide a client through the City Hall process, then step aside just before a public vote.

When an issue in which an official has

Talkback

A citizens task force has recommended wording for an ethics code that would cover Scottsdale City Council members, appointed board members and employees. We want your opinion.

■ Do you think an ethics code is needed? Why?

■ Does the approach to this ethics code strike the right balance?

■ What would you like to see in an ethics code?

E-mail us at re.letters@scottsdalerepublic.com or write us at Opinions, Scottsdale Republic, 36277 N. Greenway-Hayden Loop, Suite 200, Scottsdale, AZ 85260. You can also fax us at (602) 444-7985.

an interest comes up for consideration, the code requires the official to announce the conflict and leave the room while the matter is being discussed. No winks allowed.

■ City officials would be prohibited from accepting gifts. This includes the standard meaning of the word. The code also forbids any favoritism to city officials or their relatives in real estate deals.

■ Open government is highlighted. "City officials shall conduct themselves in a manner that fully adheres to and preferably exceeds state laws concerning open meetings and transparency of actions. Indeed, City officials are encouraged to employ a 'mindset of openness.'"

Executive sessions should be infrequent, and the city attorney should attend to make sure discussions don't stray.

Amen. We cannot say it loudly enough. Amen.

■ Anyone who believes unethical behavior has occurred can file a complaint, which must be documented. Safeguards, including prosecution for perjury, are included to prevent politically motivated attacks. Investigations are conducted at arms length, with an independent board established for any complaints against a council member.

Writing the code was accompanied by vigorous debate, DeCabooter says. Every word has been thought through. It is an excellent guidepost for ethical government.

"I expect (the council) will applaud it, endorse it and undertake the steps to pass an ordinance to implement it," DeCabooter says. We'll second that.