

ETHICAL PRACTICES BOARD

First Floor South, Centennial Building . 658 Cedar Street . St. Paul, MN 55155-1603

THE FOLLOWING PUBLICATION DOES NOT IDENTIFY
THE REQUESTER OF THE ADVISORY OPINION, WHICH IS NONPUBLIC DATA
under Minn. Stat. § 10A.02, subd. 12 (b) (1994 Minn. Laws, ch. 377, sec. 1)

RE: Gifts to Official

ADVISORY OPINION #168

SUMMARY

168. An official is prohibited from accepting a gift from lobbyists and lobbyist principals in the form of payments to defray the costs of conferences that the official attends. Minn. Stat. § 10A.071. An official may accept payment of travel, hotel, and meal expenses for attendance at conferences when the payment is made from funds other than those paid by lobbyists or lobbyist principals.

FACTS

As a public official, as defined in Minn. Stat. § 10A.01, subd. 18, and, therefore, an official as defined in Minn. Stat. § 10A.071, subd. 1 (c), you ask the Ethical Practices Board for an advisory opinion based upon your statement of the following facts:

1. Two upcoming conferences will be sponsored by a nonprofit, bipartisan charitable organization organized under § 501 (c) (3) of the Internal Revenue Code, whose mission is to educate and support government leaders around the country on relevant issues.
2. Because officials cannot easily afford all of the travel, hotel, and meal expenses that are necessary in attending their conferences, the organization pays these expenses for all attenders.
3. You have been asked to be a speaker at one of the conferences. You attended a similar conference and found it to be an extremely beneficial experience.
4. The sponsor is a nation-wide organization that accepts contributions from many sources including either lobbyists or lobbyist principals in Minnesota. However, the organization is willing to fund your expenses from a special account maintained which does not include monies received from corporations. This account consists of membership dues collected from individual members exclusively.

5. The sponsor is able to confirm that none of the membership dues held in the special account, from which your expenses will be paid, has come from a lobbyist or principal in Minnesota.

QUESTION

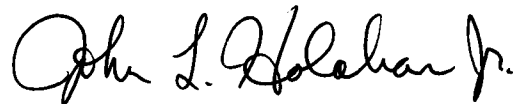
If you attend two upcoming conferences sponsored by this organization, can your travel, hotel, and meal expenses for the conference paid by the organization from a special fund that consists of membership dues none of which has been paid by a lobbyist or principal in Minnesota?

OPINION

Minn. Stat. Ch. 10A prohibits gifts from lobbyists and lobbyist principals to an official. To the extent that any portion of the costs of the conferences are paid by a lobbyist or a lobbyist principal, you are prohibited from accepting the gift. The term "gift" is broadly defined by Minn. Stat. § 10A.071, subd. 1(b). Donations from a lobbyist or lobbyist principal to pay in whole or in part for the cost of the conferences are not within any exemption from the gift prohibition in Minn. Stat. § 10A.071. The Board advises you to pay contemporaneously for overhead costs of the conferences, paid from donations by lobbyists or lobbyist principals, that are attributable to your attendance at the conference.

Based on a review of the information submitted, it is the opinion of the Board that payment of your travel, hotel, and meal expenses for the conferences from funds other than those paid to the sponsoring organization by lobbyists or lobbyist principals is not prohibited by Minn. Stat. § 10A.071.

Issued: 10-7-1994



John L. Holahan, Jr., Chair
Ethical Practices Board

PERTINENT STATUTES

Minn. Stat. § 10A.01 DEFINITIONS provides:

...
Subd. 11. (a) "Lobbyist" means an individual:

- (1) engaged for pay or other consideration, or authorized to spend money by another

individual, association, political subdivision, or public higher education system, who spends more than five hours in any month or more than \$250, not including the individual's own travel expenses and membership dues, in any year, for the purpose of attempting to influence legislative action or administrative action, or the official action of a metropolitan governmental unit, by communicating or urging others to communicate with public or local officials.

...

Subd. 18. "Public official" means any:

- (a) member of the legislature;
- (b) constitutional officer in the executive branch and the officer's chief administrative deputy;
- (c) member, chief administrative officer or deputy chief administrative officer of a state board or commission which has at least one of the following powers: (i) the power to adopt, amend or repeal rules, or (ii) the power to adjudicate contested cases or appeals;
- (d) commissioner, deputy commissioner, or assistant commissioner of any state department as designated pursuant to section 15.01;
- (e) individual employed in the executive branch who is authorized to adopt, amend or repeal rules or adjudicate contested cases;
- (f) executive director of the state board of investment;
- (g) executive director of the Indian affairs intertribal board;
- (h) commissioner of the iron range resources and rehabilitation board;
- (i) commissioner of mediation services;
- (j) deputy of any official listed in clauses (e) to (i);
- (k) judge of the workers' compensation court of appeals;
- (l) administrative law judge or compensation judge in the state office of administrative hearings or referee in the department of jobs and training;
- (m) solicitor general or deputy, assistant or special assistant attorney general;
- (n) individual employed by the legislature as secretary of the senate, chief clerk of the house, revisor of statutes, or researcher, legislative analyst, or attorney in the office of senate counsel and research or house research;
- (o) member or chief administrative officer of the metropolitan council, regional transit board, metropolitan transit commission, metropolitan waste control commission, metropolitan parks and open spaces commission, metropolitan airports commission or metropolitan sports facilities commission;
- (p) the director of the racing commission, the director of the gambling control board, the director of the state lottery, and the deputy director of the state lottery;
- (q) director or the division of gambling enforcement in the department of public safety;
- (r) member or executive director of the higher education facilities authority; or
- (s) member of the board of directors or president of the Minnesota world trade center corporation.

...

Subd. 28. **Principal.** "Principal" means an individual or association that:

- (1) spends more than \$500 in the aggregate in any calendar year to engage a lobbyist,

compensate a lobbyist, or authorize the expenditure of money by a lobbyist; or

(2) is not included in clause (1) and spends a total of at least \$50,000 in any calendar year on efforts to influence legislative action, administrative action, or the official action of governmental units, as described in section 10A.04, subdivision 6.

Laws of 1994, Ch. 377, Sec. 5, created Minn. Stat. § 10A.071 CERTAIN GIFTS BY LOBBYISTS AND PRINCIPALS PROHIBITED which provides:

Subdivision 1. Definitions. (a) The definitions in this subdivision apply to this section.

(b) "Gift" means money, real or personal property, a service, a loan, a forbearance or forgiveness of indebtedness, or a promise of future employment, that is given and received without the giver receiving consideration of equal or greater value in return.

(c) "Official" means a public official, an employee of the legislature, or a local official of a metropolitan governmental unit.

Subd. 2. Prohibition. A lobbyist or principal may not give a gift or request another to give a gift to an official. An official may not accept a gift from a lobbyist or principal.

Subd. 3. Exceptions. (a) The prohibitions in this sections do not apply if the gift is:

(1) a contribution as defined in section 10A.01, subdivision 7;

(2) services to assist an official in the performance of official duties, including by not limited to providing advice, consultation, information, and communication in connection with legislation, and services to constituents;

(3) services of insignificant monetary value;

(4) a plaque or similar memento recognizing individual services in a field of specialty or to a charitable cause;

(5) a trinket or memento of insignificant value;

(6) informational material of unexceptional value; or

(7) food or a beverage given at a reception, meal, or meeting away from the recipient's place of work by an organization before whom the recipient appears to make a speech or answer questions as part of a program.

(b) The prohibitions in this section do not apply if the gift is given:

(1) because of the recipient's membership in a group, a majority of whose members are not officials, and an equivalent gift is given to the other members of the group; or

(2) by a lobbyist or principal who is a member of the family of the recipient, unless the gift is given on behalf of someone who is not a member of that family.