

# Ethics Reform Needed in Erie & Niagara County

May 5, 2016 Artvoice by Paul Wolf, Esq.

With numerous politicians being convicted in Albany, there has been a lot of focus on the need for ethics reform in the New York State Legislature. Similar attention and focus should also be directed towards ethics reform at the local government level.

## Board of Ethics

The Erie County Board of Ethics meets regularly and posts their meeting agendas and minutes on the County website.

However, on the Niagara County website [or through Google], I could not find any information whatsoever about the Niagara County Board of Ethics such as who the members are, when is the next meeting, or past meeting minutes etc.

The Niagara County Board of Ethics should immediately establish a public presence in the light of day, posting information on their meetings and actions.

## Ethics Reforms for Erie and Niagara County

**Eliminate All Gifts –** The current ethics code in Niagara and Erie Counties prohibit county officials and employees from accepting gifts worth more than \$75.

But why are any gifts allowed?

Until 1989, Erie County officials could receive gifts up to \$1,000. In 1989, County Executive Dennis Gorski proposed that the gift limit be lowered from \$1,000 to \$25 and legislators balked stating that a public servant should not be prohibited from having someone pick up their dinner check! To preserve the ability for a free dinner, the County Legislature lowered the acceptable gift amount from \$1000 to \$75 in 1989.

Still, there should be zero tolerance for influencing government officials and receiving any gift should not be allowed.

## Update and Publicize Financial Disclosure Forms

When we compare what the state requires and publishes to what Erie and Niagara Counties do, we see that there is a lot to be desired at the local level.

The disclosure form that New York State officials are required to complete asks for very detailed information. Everything must be filled out and everything is available for public scrutiny. The disclosure forms for every state elected official are posted online without any information redacted.

Conversely, financial disclosure form used by Erie County requests scanty information laid out in very broad categories. Moreover, an interested Erie County resident cannot view his county legislator's disclosure form online or even obtain a complete copy. If you get your hands on one it will be almost useless since the Board of Ethics redacts all dollar figures.

Niagara County is even worse: What the Niagara County disclosure form even requests is more or less a total mystery to residents since the form is not to be found anywhere on the Internet.

Incredibly, financial disclosure forms in Niagara County are kept in sealed envelopes which cannot be viewed by the public [or the press]. These sealed envelopes are destroyed after five years. What good is having county officials fill out financial disclosure forms if the press or the public can't see them?

The Erie and Niagara County Legislature should consider amending their Ethics Code to require the use of the New York State disclosure form and the completed forms should be posted online for the public to see.

**Campaign Contributions –** New York City has a local law which prevents individuals and companies doing business with the city from contributing more than \$400 in a mayor election and more than \$250 in a City Council election. Legislation seeking to regulate campaign contributions from contractors doing business with the county has been introduced in Albany County. Similar legislation could be adopted by Erie and Niagara County.

**Open Government Board –** Many communities across the country have committed themselves to operating government in a more transparent way by forming Open Government Boards. Locally the Village of Williamsville and the town of Amherst have formed such citizen boards. The purpose of these boards is to make government more transparent by providing more information to the public. Open government does not happen by accident and there should be a citizen board in Erie and Niagara County dedicated to making government more open.

Perhaps a reform minded legislator in Erie and Niagara Counties would be willing to introduce legislation for all or some of these items?

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