

# QUEEN ANNE'S COUNTY ETHICS COMMISSION



Annual Report  
2014

## Queen Anne's County Ethics Commission



### 2014 Annual Report

## Introduction

The Maryland General Assembly enacted the State Ethics Law in 1979. The purpose of the law is to protect the public's confidence and trust in government by assuring the impartiality and independent judgment of State Officials and employees. The Maryland Public Ethics Law requires local jurisdiction to enact provisions that are similar to the State Public Ethics Law. The Queen Anne's County Commissioners have complied with this requirement through the passage of and amendments to the Queen Anne's County Public Ethics Law.

The Queen Anne's County Ethics Commission administers the County's Public Ethics Law (Chapter 8 of the Queen Anne's County Code) by encouraging and enforcing compliance with its requirements. The Commission does so by various educational and informational outreach efforts, issuance of Advisory Opinions, consideration and resolution of Complaints, ensuring compliance with public financial disclosure requirements of various County officials and employee's, and overseeing lobbyist registration and annual reporting requirements – all more specifically described below.

The Ethics Commission consists of five members and one alternate. Commission members serve a five-year term, and the terms are staggered. In this way it is possible to acquire new ideas and perspectives without sacrificing continuity and experience. At the start of the year in 2014 the commission consisted of Jody Schulz, who was elected chair for the calendar year by a vote of the Commission, Robert Udoff, Steffan R. Sonneveldt, Mary Roby (Alternate from Jan. – May), Dale Anderson, and David Kaufman appointed as Alternate starting in May.

The Commission meets formally once a month, usually on the third Monday of each month, in the County Commissioners' Hearing Room in the Liberty Building in Centreville. Members of the public are welcome to attend the open sessions of each meeting. During the open portion of the meeting the Commission discusses the status of financial disclosure reports,

ethics training, requests for advisory opinions and other issues, and hears comments from the public. If necessary, the commission also meets in a closed or executive session to conduct confidential business generally including discussion of requests for advisory opinion, complaints and the progress of any investigations and to consult counsel. Hearings on complaints of ethics violations are also handled during closed sessions. All final actions of the Commission are taken in the open portion of the meetings as required by Section 8-8D of the Queen Anne's County Code.

In 2014, The Commission only needed to meet in person on the following dates: January 27<sup>th</sup>, February 24<sup>th</sup>, May 19<sup>th</sup>, October 20<sup>th</sup>, and November 17<sup>th</sup>.

The Commission is staffed by a part time clerk, Tina Miles, and is advised by an attorney, Lynn Knight, who is appointed by the Commission with approval of the County Commissioners.

## **Education and Outreach**

The County did not hold many new employee orientations, therefore the Ethics Commission did not offer many presentations on the Queen Anne's County Ethics Ordinance to new county employees. Attorney Lynn Knight did provide training and individual discussion with new hires as needed throughout the calendar year. When the county holds new hire orientation, one of the Ethics Committee members offers an overview of the purpose and concept of the ordinance in order to prepare the new employees to recognize potential ethics issues, both on the job and off in some circumstances – primarily related to potential conflicts of interest with their county employment.

## **Advisory Opinions**

In 2014 the Commission issued only one Advisory Opinion. Advisory Opinions are initiated either upon request, or by the Commission itself as a result of issues raised during its regular meetings. Each opinion, redacted as necessary to preserve confidentiality, is announced during the public portion of the meeting and becomes available to the public in written form after notification of the individual requesting the opinion. Unlike a Complaint, Advisory Opinions are as the name states, advisory in nature, and an opinion on the ethics matter rendered by the Commission. Advisory Opinions are based solely on the facts presented by the individual(s) or party requesting the opinion. The Commission does not conduct any investigation of the facts (although it may, on occasion, ask for clarification), and the opinions

are not binding. The following summary of the Advisory Opinion from 2014 should be used as a guide only, and should not be utilized in place of the entire opinion.

14-01

Considered if there was a conflict of interest by a county employee who also holds a volunteer position with a local organization. The Commission considered if the solicitation or receiving of gifts, donations, support, volunteering, etc. from other local businesses would be a conflict of interest. The Commissions determined that there would be a conflict of interest under Section 8-12 of the Ethics Code.

## **Financial Disclosure**

The Queen Anne's County Public Ethics Law, Chapter 8 of the Queen Anne's County Code, requires that elected County officials, certain employees, members of decision-making authority boards or commissions, and various other individuals disclose their financial affairs annually, as well as upon employment/appointment and upon leaving office, as a tool to guard against conflicts of interest and to assure the public that Queen Anne's County business is being properly conducted.

In 2014, the Commission received and reviewed 200 financial disclosure statements. The deadline for filing the annual financial disclosure statements is January 31<sup>st</sup>.

## **Complaints**

Section 8-10, Letter G of the Code of Queen Anne's County outlines how a Compliant must be filed. Additionally it outlines The Commission's responsibility and timeline obligations for responding to the Compliant. The Commission did not receive any complaints in 2014.

## **Lobbying Disclosure**

In 2014 the Commission registered 6 lobbyists from the time period between January 1<sup>st</sup>, 2014 and December 31<sup>st</sup>, 2014 and received 13 year-end Lobbying Disclosure Forms. Continuing its efforts to make the public, and individuals who may be functioning as lobbyists, aware of the requirements under the County Ethics Law to register and to file a disclosure form, the Commission sent a letter to all County Boards and Commissions requesting their help in

identifying lobbyists that appear before them so that the Commission can ensure they are aware of, and comply with, their registration and reporting responsibilities.

Lobbying disclosure under the Public Ethics Law has two aspects. First, lobbyists are required to file a registration statement within five days of first acting as a lobbyist, and yearly thereafter. Second, any lobbyist who expends funds or receives compensation to influence County Government action, or who gives gifts, such as meals and beverages to influence County government action, is required to file a detailed year-end disclosure report are public records available for inspecting and copying.

## **Conclusion**

In 2014, the Queen Anne's Ethics Commission continued to serve the citizens of Queen Anne's County by fulfilling its obligations under Chapter 8, Ethics of the Code of Queen Anne's County.

In addition to the Advisory Opinion, the Commission ensured that all new County Employees were educated on the Ethics Code. The Commission additionally made sure that all Lobbyists complied with the required documents necessary according to the Code of Queen Anne's County.

The Ethics Commission has, and will, continue to monitor the Maryland State Ethics Commission, ensuring that Queen Anne's County remains current with any changes to the Maryland State Ethics Code.

Respectfully Submitted,

Queen Anne's County Ethics Commission

Jody Schulz, Chairman

Robert Udoff

Steffan R. Sonneveldt

Mary Roby

Dale Anderson

David Kaufmann, Alternate Member

