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Officials debate city code of ethics

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By Zeynep Pamuk
Contributing Reporter
Published Tuesday, October 30, 2007

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New Haven aldermen on Monday debated the merits of a proposed Code of Ethics drafted to prevent corruption among city officials and employees.

The New Haven Joint Aldermanic Affairs and Legislation Committee met to discuss amendments to the city Code of Ethics for public officials, executive management employees and city contractors. As part of an ongoing discussion of the proposed code, committee members debated the definition of conflicts of interest in allowable employment options of former city employees and in gifts to public officials. But the board did not officially revise any city statutes.



Ryan Galisewski/Photography Editor
Aldermen discuss University development around Dixwell Street in a September 2006 meeting.

Although some members said they worried some provisions of the code could discourage New Haven residents from taking city jobs, board members generally said they think the code is necessary as a precaution against corruption.

Ward 5 Alderman Jorge Perez, the chair of the committee that started drafting the code – which defines standards of ethical conduct for city officials and employees – two years ago, said it is necessary to define what constitutes corruption before conflicts arise.

“The whole purpose is to set the alarm before the robber enters,” Perez said at the meeting. “Ethics is not something you can regulate, but in order to avoid problems, you have to have an idea of what could happen.”

The committee discussed amendments to the boundaries of “conflicts of interest.” The code stipulates that employees who aswe under contract with the city cannot be employed by “a governmental entity or non-profit or community-based organization” during the one-year period after their city employment terminates.

Board President and Ward 29 Alderman Carl Goldfield said he thinks this restriction could make some people – especially Yale staff who might consider temporary employment – reluctant to work for the city.

“You want to use the expertise of Yale staff in city government,” he said. “But Yale is a non-profit organization and if people think they can’t go back to Yale after taking this [city] job, they wouldn’t want to work for the city.”

Committee members emphasized that the code was not drafted after any specific incident in New Haven. National and state government scandals – including corruption in the administration of former Governor John Rowland – contributed to the decision, Perez said.

Just under half of the approximately 10 aldermen present said before the committee that they had reservations about the code.

Ward 26 Alderman Sergio Rodriguez said he thinks it may be difficult to make the code work fairly and equitably, without politicizing enforcement.

The Code of Ethics includes a section calling for the creation of a Board of Ethics, which will be responsible for evaluating the ethical conduct of city officials. The board will then

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investigate possible breaches of the code, conduct hearings if necessary and produce a report for the Board of Aldermen.

The definition of “gifts” that public officials may receive ethically was also a source of contention at the debate. The board disagreed on the acceptability of honorariums paid to aldermen in return for speeches they deliver and articles they publish.

“If the New Yorker was so fascinated by my work as alderman and offered to feature me, could I not collect any money from them?” Ward 7 Alderwoman Frances “Bitsie” Clark said.

According to the Code of Ethics, the answer is no.

The meeting was open to the public. A member of the New Haven Citizens’ Action Network, Mona Berman, testified at the hearing, asking the board for more transparency in its ethics policies.

“To become a little more accessible to citizens, the board could change the wording of the code,” Berman said. “If an 18-year-old teenager can understand it, then maybe we all can.”

The committee will discuss the code further at its next meeting, on Nov. 26.

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