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POLITICS

Gifts, ethics laws discussed

The senior attorney for the Florida Commission on Ethics gave politicians a stern warning about accepting gifts: **'If you like it, don't take it.'**

BY RON WORD
Associated Press

PONTE VEDRA BEACH - Once candidates are elected to office, they suddenly gain more friends who may try to influence their decisions with dinners, hunting trips, golf outings and other gifts, a state ethics officials warned Thursday.

But Virlindia Doss, senior attorney for the Florida Commission on Ethics, had a stern warning for about 150 city and county government officials attending the Florida Ethics Conference and Attorney General's Sunshine Summit.

"If you like it, don't take it," she said.

Doss outlined nuances of Florida's ethics laws and reporting requirements.

"You should not accept when you know or should know it is being given to influence you," she said, explaining the concept of unauthorized compensation.

A general question, she said, is: "Would it be offered to me if not for my public position," Doss said.

Gifts include food or beverages, membership dues, plants and transportation and lodging.

Government officials can accept gifts from lobbyists valued at under \$100 or less. However, a gift between \$25 and \$100 must be reported.

Gifts from non-lobbyists and friends can total more than \$100, but those also must be reported quarterly to the Florida Ethics Commission.

"The law is very, very difficult," she said. "The gift law generates a lot of questions."

Tom Scarritt, chairman of the Florida Commission on Ethics, said he is working to increase awareness of Florida's ethics laws and make the agency more efficient.

"Our job is to try to educate more," he said. "I think we can decrease the number of people coming before us [on ethics violation complaints]."

Scarritt is dismayed when a public official tells him, "I just didn't know the law."

Doss' summary on the law brought dozens of questions.

Steve Rohan, the ethics officer for the City of Jacksonville, asked Doss if there was an exemption for people like Mayor John Peyton, who often have to attend expensive events "as the face of the city."

Her answer was there was no such exemption.

Peyton and Jacksonville City Council members often attend events in their official capacity. A recent example, Rohan said, were parties surrounding Super Bowl XXIV in February, where the admission tickets had a face value of more than \$100.

One way to avoid the problem is for the city officials to pay any amount more than the \$100 limit, Rohan said.

The mayor and vice mayor and two other city commission members and the city attorney of the 8-year-old city of Sunny Isles Beach in Miami-Dade County attended the conference to learn what was required of public officials.

"We just want to do the right thing," said Commissioner Roslyn Brezin.

"This just showed they are seriously interested in following the sunshine laws and ethics laws," said City Attorney Hans Ottinot.

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