

SUBJECT: COUNTY COUNCIL CANDIDATE WITH SPOUSE EMPLOYED BY COUNTY

SUMMARY:

The spouse of a candidate for county council may continue as an employee of the county if the spouse is elected without violating the Ethics Reform Act. A county council member who has a spouse employed by the county may vote on general salary increases for county employees but may not participate in salary raises for the family member which are not general salary increases. The council member may not participate in matters affecting the promotion, advancement, transfer, or disciplinary actions concerning a spouse who is employed by the county.

QUESTION:

A candidate for Oconee County Council questions whether there is a problem with the Ethics Reform Act since his wife is employed by the County as Personnel Coordinator, a position she has held for fourteen years.

DISCUSSION:

This opinion is rendered in response to a letter dated February 25, 1992 requesting an opinion from the State Ethics Commission. The Commission's jurisdiction is limited to the applicability of the Ethics, Government Accountability, and Campaign Reform Act of 1991 (Act No. 248 of 1991; Section 8-13-100 et. seq., as amended, 1976 Code of Laws). This opinion does not supersede any other statutory or regulatory restrictions or procedures which may apply to this situation.

Section 8-13-750 provides:

(A) No public official, public member, or public employee may cause the employment, appointment, promotion, transfer, or advancement of a family member to a state or local office or position in which the public official, public member, or public employee supervises or manages.

(B) A public official, public member, or public employee may not participate in an action relating to the discipline of the public official's public member's, or public employee's family member.

Family member is defined in Section 8-13-100(15) as:

"Family member" means an individual who is:

(a) the spouse, parent, brother, sister, child, mother-in-law, father-in-law,

son-in-law, daughter-in-law, grandparent, or grandchild; or  
(b) a member of the individual's immediate family.

A family member who is presently employed by a county would not be required to resign if the spouse is elected since Section 8-13-750 prohibits taking action to hire, promote, advance, or participate in disciplinary actions over family members they supervise or manage. A county council member who has a family member as defined in Section 8-13-100(15) who is employed by the county must, however, follow the provisions of Section 8-13-700(B) which provides in part as follows:

No public official, public member, or public employee may make, participate in making, or in any way attempt to use his office, membership, or employment to influence a governmental decision in which he, a member of his immediate family, an individual with whom he is associated, or a business with which he is associated has an economic interest. A public official, public member, or public employee who, in the discharge of his official responsibilities, is required to take an action or make a decision which affects an economic interest of himself, a member of his immediate family an individual with whom he is associated, or a business with which he is associated shall:

(1) prepare a written statement describing the matter requiring action or decisions and the nature of his potential conflict of interest with respect to the action or decision;

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(4) if he is a public official, other than a member of the General Assembly, he shall furnish a copy of the statement to the presiding officer of the governing body of any agency, commission, board, or of any county municipality, or a political subdivision thereof, on which he serves, who shall cause the statement to be printed in the minutes and require that the member be excused from any votes, deliberations, and other a actions on the matter on which the potential conflict of interest exists and shall cause the disqualification and reasons for it to be noted in the minutes;

Economic Interest is defined in Section 8-13-100(11) as:

(11)(a) Economic interest" means an interest distinct from that of the general public in a purchase, sale, lease, contract, option, or other transaction or arrangement involving property or services in which a public official, public member, or public employee may gain an economic benefit of fifty dollars or more.

(b) This definition does not prohibit a public official, public member, or public employee from participating in, voting on, or influencing or attempting to influence an official decision if the only economic interest or reasonably

foreseeable benefit that may accrue to the public official, public member, or public employee is incidental to the public official's, public member's, or public employee's position or which accrues to the public official, public member, or public employee as a member of a profession, occupation, or large class to no greater extent than the economic interest or potential benefit could reasonably be foreseen to accrue to all other members of the profession, occupation, or large class.

The candidate, if elected to county council, would not be prohibited from participating in deliberations and votes on salary increases since the economic interest accrues to all county employees as a class. The Commission advises, however, that in accordance with Section 8-13-700(B), the council member could not participate in deliberations and votes on matters directly affecting the family member as an individual such as a raise for that specific employee outside the raises approved for all county employees as a group.