



The Voice of Ethics Podcast Transcript

July 2026 Episode

Trail Mix-Ups: Ethics in the Parks

Susan:

Hello ethical people. I'm Susan Willeke of the Ohio Ethics Commission, welcoming you to The Voice of Ethics, the podcast where we dive into stories about ethics in government. Because we are dropping this episode in July, I thought it would be fun to mentally travel to spots in Ohio that I consider to be among my happy places. I bet we all have wonderful memories shaped in these very locations in Ohio. Hiking, picnicking, family reunions, tennis, fishing, or just enjoying a beautiful afternoon outdoors.

If you haven't guessed it yet - yes, I am talking about public parks. We have two stories for you in this episode about parks and the Ethics Law, but since two is often better than one, like in stories, I've also invited back my favorite ethics pal and colleague Nick Rohrbaugh to this episode. **clapping** Yay!

Nick:

Hello ethical people!

Susan:

So, Nick, you've been on the podcast before because you're cool, you do your job well, you're an ethics genius and nerd like I am. Here's, though, the other reason you're qualified for this episode to talk about parks - what's your better half do for a living, Nick?

Nick:

My better half is an assistant park manager for the Franklin County Metro Parks system here. So yep yep yep. I know a lot about parks. I get to hear a lot of stuff about the parks.

Susan:

So she likes being outdoors, obviously.

Nick:

Oh, absolutely. Yes, she loves being outdoors. She has a bachelor's degree from OSU for Forestry and Wildlife Management, diehard nature lover for sure.

Susan:

And I'm hoping that when she comes home from her work at the park system that most of her stories are good, wonderful, upbeat, happy stories of people enjoying the park. Right?

Nick:

Oh, absolutely. You know the people around here love these parks. They are just a phenomenal asset to central Ohio here.

Susan:

Yeah. So shout out to everybody all over Ohio, not just Nick's wife. Everybody all over Ohio - at the state level, our DNR folks, at the local government level, thank you for all you do to make these places available that we can hopefully get kids off their devices and back outdoors.

Nick:

laugh As the kids say, "touch grass."

Susan:

Oh I've never heard that before! Okay, so the reason I wanted to establish right up front that most of your wife's stories are good, excellent, wonderful - because while those are wonderful stories, they don't make necessarily great stories about ethics true crime.

Nick:

They wouldn't be on a true crime podcast if it was just people in their lovely picnic or their dogs and the whatnot.

Susan:

Right? So of course we've chosen, Nick and I have chosen, two stories of ethics in the parks, maybe gone awry. Just a little bit, if you will.

Nick:

Just a little bit, yeah.

Susan:

These both did take place in Ohio. We'll just say that, never want to shame anybody. But we will note here some of the things, maybe decisions, that could have gone better had they asked questions first.

So I'm going to shut up. Nick, you've got the first one. I'm going to let you go first, then we can chat about it after you kind of give us the basics of the story.

Nick:

Okay. So our first park story today - we had the president of a park district board. So this is not a city employee. This is someone that was appointed to a little board for a parks district. These aren't full time employees.

Susan:

Right. Because he serves on this board, they have fiduciary and financial responsibilities, that they're still subject to the law, but it doesn't mean he's there 24/7, I get that.

Nick:

Yeah, absolutely

Susan:

Yeah, that makes sense.

Nick:

And he was a business owner, and that's kind of what came up here. So in this situation, this president, he had participated in, he voted on and signed off on some park contracts for a business owned by himself and his family.

There was a retaining wall at the park surrounding their public pool. It was crumbling. And hey, you know this guy, he's owned this stone business for 20 some years, doing this stuff all the time.

Susan:

So he's an expert.

Nick:

He's the expert, right? Of course he's going to have a lot of insight into how to get this job done, and of course, the board is going to trust him. They're going to take his word -

Susan:

Yeah, I mean, that makes sense. I get it. To ask for his advice and insight as a business owner. Yeah.

Nick:

Absolutely. Absolutely. So they follow his recommendations here. Ultimately, the board voted to give his business the contract to repair the wall. All in, spending just about \$300,000.

Susan:

And when you say the board, tell me about his involvement or lack thereof.

Nick:

He did vote on it, but he had done a ton of recommendations. He did vote on it and he did sign off on it.

Susan:

Okay, okay.

Nick:

I have no idea what a job like this would entail or cost. I'm not a wall guy, you know. I'm not a construction guy, but as a taxpayer, I'm going to automatically have some level of distrust for this,

Susan:

Right.

Nick:

That's a big amount of money, could this guy be giving himself a blank check here? He's the president of the board - how much are they willing to push back on him? Or whatever.

Susan:

Yeah!

Nick:

Yeah, it just sows a big seed of doubt when it comes to that whole process there.

Susan:

Right, right. Yeah.

Nick:

In researching this, I came across the park district's website, and even right there on their website, they very prominently feature this particular revitalization project.

Susan:

Oh? Yeah.

Nick:

They've got a little photo gallery here, even, you know, more than five years later. So they clearly see this project as a success.

Susan:

We're not we're not suggesting that the work was shoddy or that - it's not that. It's just. Yeah, okay.

Let's pretend for a minute he had recused. That they had discussed it and he said, "Oh, I can't discuss it" or "I can't vote on it." Does that change anything under the statute under the Ethics Law in Ohio?

Nick:

It does not change anything because of 2921.42(A)(4). Recusal from the discussion and the voting on the contract,

Susan:

Which would have been better, if he would have recused!

Nick:

It would have been better!

Susan:

But it doesn't solve everything.

Nick:

It does not solve everything, because of (A)(4) there, that prohibition against having the interest in the contract, making money on the contract.

Susan:

Right. Exactly. For any listeners out there thinking, "But if he could do a good job, and if he did give a good deal, doesn't that save the public money?"

To be fair, there is an exception to that whole idea of people selling goods and services to their public entity, if in fact it benefits the public - it's a hugely discounted blah blah blah...there are allowances in the Ethics Law for that.

Nick:

Well, one thing I will say here, in this case, we even found that no other companies were even given the opportunity to bid on this.

Susan:

Exactly. You can't prove that this was the only service available or that he could give the best, lowest price because they didn't even do that research. Well, I want to hear your thoughts, too, Nick on this case. And the one we'll talk about next of - intentionality. Was this guy a villain?

Nick:

No, I genuinely think he thought he was doing the right thing. The board thought they were doing the right thing by having a local expert do the work, right?

Susan:

Yeah. Yeah.

Nick:

But to an outside person, they just see the number and they see that conflict of interest, you know? They see, they see the problems there. And so to a taxpayer it does damage that public trust that we talk about all the time.

Susan:

Right. I think that's an important point because some of our stories on the podcast are fun because they can be outrageous and, you know, just crazy to talk about, but I don't want to have the message here of this show to be that only crazy, villainous people are the ones that make mistakes under the Ethics Law. Sometimes they're decent human beings that probably should have just asked questions first before, you know, in this case, he acted on these matters.

Nick:

Really, that's what the Ethics Commission deals with more than anything else. Yeah, our podcast is going to have the wild stories or whatever, but we're dealing with public officials, public employees that are trying to serve the public as best they know how. A lot of times they're not listening to the podcast. They don't know the law, they don't know (A1), (A3), (A4).

Susan:

Exactly. I think that's a pretty good segue actually, Nick, into the next story, because I do think the next story is kind of in that same vein. It's related to parks, public parks in Ohio, but it's also two people that I do not think are bad people.

They genuinely believed that they were doing the right thing. And in some ways, the work that they did did benefit the park system. It just went awry of the Ethics Law. Again, if they'd only asked questions first. So this story kind of starts with, I think, the desire to express appreciation, right?

You know, Nick, you've stayed late to finish projects for me, you dropped things last minute to help me out - it's understandable that somebody might want to show that appreciation, whether it's, you know, out in the private sector, it's a plaque, it's, you know, I don't know, a bonus at the end of the year. But this story is two public officials and someone wanting to thank them in the form of money.

Nick:

Ah, there's a problem. Yeah.

Susan:

So what part of the law am I going to go with here, do you think?

Nick:

We're talking about supplemental compensation here.

Susan:

Right. That whole, like, no gratuities, that we can't pay people or tip people to do their job. So here's the story. This story involves a public park system and a nonprofit organization created to support it. Has your wife worked with, is that common in park systems?

Nick:

It's definitely a thing here. There's Friends of the Metro Parks, a nonprofit that supports the Metro Parks, a lot of volunteers and stuff like that, and definitely money. She has applied for grants for her park to this nonprofit.

Susan:

So working together, they actually can accomplish wonderful things for the park system,

Nick:

Oh absolutely, yeah.

Susan:

Can raise funds, etc.. Okay. Yeah. So that's very similar to this story here that this nonprofit had been established to support the city parks in this community and for a while it was going well. And then frankly, it began to founder a little bit. These leadership positions in the nonprofit became vacant. Fundraising, unfortunately, took a nosedive. It needed help. It just needed to be revitalized. So two park employees stepped in. They wanted to help. One was the director of the park system, and the other was the person that managed financial services for the park system, and they agreed to jump in to help this foundation.

To be fair, neither one received a salary. You know, there was no, like, from the nonprofit, like, "Oh, here." But they were getting paid for their normal park job because they were already park employees. So with their involvement, they actually did some impressive stuff. The foundation's fundraising increased dramatically. More private donations were coming in. There was all this philanthropic support, and they got much more successful in raising funds.

So this nonprofit board wanted to express their appreciation for their leadership, for their efforts and the results that they were seeing.

Nick:

I mean, it sounds like they saved their bacon, right?

Susan:

I mean, honestly, I don't doubt for a minute that the park system benefited greatly from these two folks' dedication there, the time they probably put in. So no one's saying they're bad people.

But here became the problem. The nonprofit's foundation, the board members, wanted to express their thanks to these two park employees in the form of like, bonuses, to actually give them money. Over the period of a few years, one employee received more than \$61,000 from the nonprofit board and the other one more than \$37,000. Yeah, so that whole supplemental compensation thing, how much have you had to interact with that?

Nick:

You know, I get questions about it a fair amount. I get questions about it at the parks, a fair amount. My wife was in law enforcement. She was a ranger for the park system. And that sort of thing does come up. I think we're going to talk about that in a future episode. We're going to have a whole episode on this supplemental compensation.

Susan:

Yes! That even if we love this public employee, this public official, they've been wonderful. You know, whether it's a firefighter or a paramedic that helped us in a bad situation or, you know, I keep thinking about that snowstorm we had in January when I saw, in where we live, it was township employees, out plowing just round the clock. Probably hadn't slept. I get why people say, "Here's ten bucks. Your next Starbucks run is on me."

We might talk about that in the upcoming episode as well, but it's still a problem because those of us in public service, you know, a lot of you listening, you're probably just like Nick and me that every other Friday we get thanked by our public employer, right? In the form of our paycheck, and we're grateful for that. But no one's allowed to supplement that compensation, no one's allowed to augment that salary, I always say.

In this case, in this situation, the two park employees, again, these payments, they weren't hidden. The nonprofit board openly voted on these things. They believed they were rewarding excellent public employees, which no one's doubting they were excellent public employees. They had helped the foundation succeed, they wanted to express gratitude. And if there's anybody out there still wondering, "Well, what's wrong with that? It helped the park succeed."

It's still that violation of the whole principle of the Ethics Law is that there should never be this issue of divided loyalties.

Nick:

Yeah. Yeah.

Susan:

So we've talked here a bit about intentionality. I just want to make it really clear - Nick and I are not suggesting in any way in this episode that these three public servants that we've talked about are bad people, right?

That they thought they were doing the right thing, that the parks did benefit. But at the end of the day, they weren't allowed to act on these matters where there was some sort of potential benefit to themselves, etc.. So for all of you guys listening today, I'm sure you also think of yourselves as good, hardworking people. And we certainly agree, and we thank you for your public service.

We just want to make sure that you understood in this episode - don't mix up intentions and how you view your character with that dictating what's in the Ethics Law. Right? Call us first. Right?

Nick:

Absolutely. Absolutely.

Susan:

Yeah. All right. That's it for this episode, everybody. Nick, thank you for another fun conversation.

Nick:

Always a pleasure, always a pleasure.

Susan:

It's kind of fun for me when Nick is actually part of the podcast, because you guys don't get to necessarily hear his voice in every one but his thumbprint is on every single one between the editing,

Nick:

laugh For better or worse.

Susan:

No, for better! For the sound effects, for all the editing, for making me sound smarter than I am in real life.

So thank you to all that Nick, for all you do for the Ethics Commission.

Nick:

Oh I love it. I love doing it.

Susan:

Very grateful. So join us again in two weeks when we will continue our foray into all things summertime. But in the meantime, Nick, I have a question for you.

Nick:

What's that Susan?

Susan:

All right, so let's say there were two vultures in a public park.

Nick:

Okay...

Susan:

And they were eating a dead comedian.

Nick:

Oh! Lovely. Okay.

Susan:

And one turns to the other. What does he say?

Nick:

contemplative pause Does this taste funny to you? **laugh**

Susan:

clapping Yes! Yay! Good job. That's the first time you solved one of my stupid jokes at the end.

Nick:

Saw that one coming.

Susan:

All right. Hey, everybody. Thanks for being here.

Nick:

Thank you folks.

Susan:

All right. Take care. Be ethical. Bye.

Before we go, I do have one more thing I'd like to do. I would like to dedicate the final moments of this episode to someone very special. I have to tell you guys - today, July 21st, the day we're dropping this episode is my Mom's 92nd birthday. So, Mom, when I think about ethics, honesty, kindness, and treating people fairly, I think about you.

Every meaningful lesson I've ever learned about being a good person came from watching the way you have lived your life. You taught me that integrity isn't something you talk about, it's something you practice every day in the way you treat others. So, Mom, thank you for your love, your wisdom and your example. Happy 92nd birthday. I love you, and I'm grateful every day that I get to call you my Mom!