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Vague ethics rules invite confusion

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This is the first of three editorials urging new ethical safeguards for the General Assembly.

Del. Terrie Suit reported last year that she sits on the board for OMG, a Chesapeake-based management company specializing in trade associations.

What the Virginia Beach Republican omitted from her financial disclosure statement is that the company, which paid her \$300 per meeting, had a \$1.2 million contract with the Hampton Roads Realtors Association.

The local Realtors group lobbies the General Assembly on issues ranging from property taxes to condemnation laws, matters in which Suit has played a key role.

Suit is a mortgage loan officer, and her professional ties to the real estate industry are well-known. But narrowly drawn ethics laws obscured her connection to an industry trade group with lobbyists at the state Capitol.

The law requires disclosure only when the lawmaker receives a direct financial benefit from an organization that lobbies.

The disclosure laws don't ensure that all connections between legislators and lobbying organizations are publicly aired. That would not be so worrisome except that there's no official watchdog to police the gray areas.

It's not clear Suit's directorship was covered by that statute, until this year. OMG re-organized and began to offer lobbying services.

However, the private company's close ties to the Realtors group raise questions about whether Suit should have reported her involvement. OMG's president also serves as executive director of the Realtors association, and the two share offices in the Battlefield Corporate Center.

Suit said she relied on a "gut check" when OMG decided to employ its own lobbyists.

She initially decided to continue on the board without compensation, but she later resigned.

As this example shows, these are complicated questions. Yet, Virginia has no ethics commission to give Suit and her colleagues advice on how to avoid conflicts or how to fill out their disclosure reports.

Although Virginia legislators are required to file annual economic interest reports, no one reviews the documents to assess whether they are filled out properly.

Some legislators attach statements to their forms stating that they are not providing all of the information requested because it is too difficult to collect.

Sens. Ken Stolle and Tommy Norment readily admit that they do not list all of the clients their law firm represents before state agencies. The two lawyer-legislators are part of the Kaufman & Canoles firm, which has more than 130 attorneys, making full disclosure a daunting task.

But sometimes the proximity of the firm's unreported work to Stolle and Norment's legislative interests is too close for comfort. Neither man revealed that the firm does legal work on immigration law for the Office of the Attorney General, even though Stolle heads a task force that makes recommendations on the issue.

Nor did they disclose that a colleague was representing a construction firm facing legal sanctions for stopping work on a state office building, even after Norment stepped in to try and resolve the conflict.

With so many gray areas, it's no surprise that the Center for Public Integrity gives Virginia an F on its disclosure laws for legislative financial interests.

That grade is unlikely to improve until lawmakers recognize the flaws in the existing system.

Absent a strong ethics commission, confusion and deliberate omissions will continue to be

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It's time for lawmakers to admit that a system based on self-policing is no way to ensure public faith in the integrity of their leaders.

Tomorrow: Legislators have the most to gain from an ethics commission.

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NOW THERE'S AN UNDERSTAMENT

Submitted by Nikki M. on Sun, 01/06/2008 at 10:17 am.

The public has absolutely "no faith in the integrity of their leaders." They our leaders/politicians, have proven to us repeatedly that they have no ethics or integrity, and are not worthy of our faith or respect, yet we keep electing the same people over and over again, hoping that the next time they won't lie to us. We have become well trained Pavlovian dogs to the rhetoric. Politics, politicians and integrity, they just don't go together and to assume otherwise means that once again we've proven we're the fools for believing otherwise.

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