

What to talk about when you're talking about ethics.

A conversation guide.

The situation with the revised ethics act is complex. It is easy to get lost in the nuances, line-by-line details, and politics of the revised act. But the bottom line is this: Vote NO on November 5, 2019. Don't be fooled by the harmless language that is used for ballot. Remember that 92% of DeKalb voters previously passed a law that set up an INDEPENDENT ethics board. We currently have active ethics laws, an ethics officer, and 3 approved members of a 7-member board.

Conversation Starter. First, introduce yourself. Then, try these questions to start the conversation:

- Did you know that there is a revision to the ethics act on the ballot on November 5?
- What do you know about the revision to the ethics act that is on the ballot on November 5?
- Do you think it is important for all of our elected and appointed officials, as well as county employees, to abide by a consistent set of ethical guidelines?

Listen to the answers. If they don't know about the ethics act, then it is an opportunity to educate them.

Main Points. Here are the three primary reasons to vote against the ethics act:

It guts the ethics board's independence. The bill undermines the independence of the ethics board by giving the DeKalb County CEO and Commission the power to interfere in ethics board governance through policies, procedures and appointments.

It sets up roadblocks for reporting ethics violations. The bill sets up roadblocks for employees to submit their concerns to the ethics board by forcing them to go through Human Resources.

It eliminates the professionalism of the ethics office. The bill downgrades the ethics officer position to that of an “administrator” with no requirement for work experience or legal or ethics training.

Answers to Questions/Concerns. People hear things, and they aren’t always correct. Here are the top three questions you may be asked:

Why is this on the ballot? The state supreme court threw out the nomination process for the board members, which included four positions appointed by community groups rather than elected officials. This ruling affected not only DeKalb, but all other boards with sanctioning authority that used community groups. That is the only thing that needs to be changed. Those four members who were formerly appointed by community groups should now be appointed by elected officials who are not under the purview of the ethics board, such as a state court judge or the legislative delegation. That is the only thing that needs to change, and that change does not require a referendum. We must have a referendum now because we have changed the duties of the CEO and Commission by involving them in the appointments and the review and approval of processes & procedures.

But, we won’t have an ethics board unless we vote for this. The DeKalb County delegation simply has to change the appointment process by having those four members previously appointed by the community groups be appointed by the delegation or judges. A simple change to the appointment process does not require a referendum, and the ethics board could be at a quorum in March. Be clear—this revision that is on the ballot is bad enough that we are better off without an ethics board until one without conflicts of interest can be appointed.

Why are we still paying for an ethics office? The State Supreme Court ruling only affects the appointment process, not the rest of the duties of the ethics function in DeKalb. The office still does training for all county employees, provides advisory opinions, reviews all tips that come in on the hotline, does investigations, etc. Cases being heard by the ethics board is what cannot happen until there is a quorum on the board.