

Public Comment 3/2/23

Good morning. I'm Lise Kennedy, from Neversink. I see that the appointment of 2 members to the Ethics Committee is to be untabled at the Special Meeting today. Since there is no public comment allowed for that meeting, I will comment on it now. Last I heard, the legislature was discussing scraping the Ethics Board entirely and the County Attorney was going to investigate doing that. The Ethics Board hasn't met since 2021, as you know. I've commented on these two appointees before. One is clearly a political appointee without any expertise in ethics. I understand that there is a shortage of volunteers to serve on the board, but I don't think someone should be appointed simply because he's the only one who applied. The Ethics Board has the power to impose penalties that can be substantial and damaging. The first candidate is a political ally of the Chairman's, and his wife is currently campaigning for a legislative seat here. I would think these associations should disqualify him from the Ethics Board. The other candidate is a county employee who could undergo pressure from his employer, although he undoubtedly has some education in ethics, as do all lawyers. I understand that there is supposed to be at least one county employee on the ethics board, but I would suggest that be a non-voting member if you do choose to proceed with this resolution.

The New York Commission on Ethics and Lobbying in Government actually has an independent review committee composed of law school deans who vet any candidates for membership on the board, and the deans can reject someone not found to have undisputed honesty, integrity and character. Here, the County Manager appoints the candidates, according to our Code of Ethics, and the Legislature confirms them. It has looked a lot more to me in this instance like the Chairman has done the appointing. Frankly, I think that the reason there are so few people interested in a position on our county ethics board is the public perception that the board is a corrupted body, used to punish political opponents, so that membership on it now is tainted and a completely thankless task. If you can't do the thing right, just don't do it. The ethics board should be composed of people who are beyond reproach or influence themselves to impartially judge others. This body obviously hasn't had the time or motivation to recruit new members who are simultaneously uninvolved in local politics and experts in ethics.

Lise Kennedy