

STATEMENT OF PAUL ROBBINS TO ETHICS REVIEW COMMISSION

June 3, 2015

Members of the Commission:

I am Paul Robbins. I am environmental activist and consumer advocate. I have been active in Austin's civic affairs since 1977. I am here to urge you to make important reforms regarding membership of non-profits on City boards and commissions.

If a for-profit lobbyist were on a City board and voted on an issue related to a paid client that they lobbied on behalf of, their votes would be decried as a conflict of interest. I see no difference if a non-profit employee does the same thing. Non-profits should not be using City boards and commissions as a branch office.

There are members of non-profits on City commissions whose service is quite valuable. It is bothersome to me that this proposal might eliminate their participation. However, I have witnessed considerable abuse of process by members of certain boards, forcing me to submit these recommendations.

Some defend non-profit employees on commissions since there is no direct profit motive, and should therefore they should be treated differently. However, some non-profits are specifically created as a tax-free way to support special interests. Even those that work on behalf of the public sometimes have positions that are polarizing.

I am advising that you consider the following 3 suggestions to amend the City code to prevent further abuse.

1. All employees of non-profits that lobby Austin government must register yearly as a public -interest advocate and state the issues that they advocate on behalf of. There would be no charge for registration.
2. These people must list the funding sources that pay them to be advocates. If the funding is from members, then stating this is all that should be required. If funding is from a specific donor or organization, this needs to be stated.
3. Public interest advocates, other staff in their offices, and members of their families may not be members of City boards pertaining to issues that the public-interest advocates work on behalf of. For example, a paid advocate on parks cannot be on the Parks Board, but they can be on the Library Commission.

This suggestion could be modified so that a public interest advocate must recuse themselves about an issue they lobby City government on if they are on a City board. However, it becomes difficult for the public to verify this. So many issues relate directly and indirectly to one another.

Nothing in these proposals prevents public interest advocates from participating in government.