

Case 10: Conflicting Interests

You are a county commissioner, elected to represent your local community. You're one of nine commissioners on the county board. Most of you are in the same political party, and you have worked together for several years.

One day, Commissioner Jones asks if he can talk to you privately about something that's on his mind. Commissioner Jones is a friend of yours. He's very charming, is a compelling speaker, and cares about many of the same issues that are important to you. He is also married to a state legislator, who's a powerful ally in your political party. In fact, Jones has many strong family, social, and political connections. These connections will be important to you if you decide to seek higher political office. You'd need their support.

You agree to meet with him. At the beginning of the meeting, Jones asks for the discussion to remain confidential, and you agree. He then tells you that he's interested in applying for a high-paying job within the county. The job has been vacant for several months. The person responsible for hiring – the county administrator – is supervised by the county board of commissioners. This means that, in his current position as a commissioner, Jones is the boss of the person who'll make the hire for the job that Jones wants.

Jones really wants this job, and thinks he'd be great at it. But he doesn't want to tell anyone about his interest publicly, because he's also running for re-election this year. Currently, it's unlikely that he'll face any opposition. However, that might change if people know he's applying for this county job. He would have to resign as commissioner if he got the job.

Jones tells you that he's worried about the timing of this decision. He wants to make sure that he either gets re-elected or gets the county job. If he resigns, the county board is responsible for appointing someone to fill his seat until the election. He tells you that he's been talking to people who might be interested in replacing him on the county board. None of this is known to the public, and Jones wants to keep it that way.

You feel uncomfortable because you see that this is a clear conflict of interest for him. You also are disturbed because he's trying to manipulate the system to his advantage, out of public view. But he's your friend and political ally. If you insist that he resign, you might alienate him and hurt your own political future.

The county board meets publicly in a week. In the meantime, you need to decide what to do.

Study questions:

1. At next week's meeting, what statement, if any, should you make about this situation?
2. What is your responsibility to your constituents as an elected public official? What your responsibility to Jones as a friend? Which responsibility takes precedence?
3. What are some concrete actions that you can take to help prevent this type of situation from happening in the future? For example, some communities have "revolving door" laws that prevent elected officials from seeking employment until at least a year after they leave office.

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