

CHARLES COUNTY ETHICS COMMISSION
OPINION

The Ethics Commission received a complaint against Commissioner Thomasina Coates from Chief Jesse James Swann, Jr. (“Complainant”) dated June 1, 2024, that provides, in relevant part:

We feel that it is inappropriate for Commissioner Coates, a registered and enrolled tribal member of the Piscataway Conoy Tribe, a recognized sovereign nation in the State of Maryland, to have participated in the vote the tribe on two occasions:

a. Participating in the process of approving a lease agreement between Charles County government and the Piscataway Conoy Tribe. The property is located at 16816 Country Lane, Waldorf, MD 20601.

b. Participating in the process of making the motion and then approving the Letter of Support: Piscataway Conoy Cultural Museum and the self-designee, Mr. Francis Gray, Tribal Chairman, Piscataway Conoy Tribe.

One of the purposes of the Charles County Ethics Code is to protect against actual or perceived improper influence upon those subject to its provisions. The Code achieves that purpose by mandating disclosure of certain financial information, and by prohibiting certain activity and economic interest on the part of the subject individual.

The Code primarily regulates County Commissioner activity in the following respects:

1. Prohibits Commissioners from participating in the decision-making process regarding county business deals which could benefit the Commissioner (and certain family members) in their private affairs;
2. Regulates certain employment and financial interests for entities either doing business with the county or subject to county control;
3. Creates certain post-employment restrictions;
4. Prohibits the use of the prestige of their office for personal gain;

5. Prohibits the solicitation and acceptance of certain gifts under most circumstances (with exceptions);
6. Prohibits the disclosure of confidential information; and
7. Establishes certain prohibitions with respect to creation of bids during the procurement process.

In the instant complaint, Complainant fails to allege that Coates either has an economic interest that is furthered by the referenced lease agreement or letter of support for the grant application, or that she failed to properly disclose financial information in violation of the Code.

The basis of the alleged Ethics Code violation, according to the complaint, is that Coates is a registered and enrolled tribal member of the Piscataway Conoy Tribe. It is true that the lease agreement is between the County and a nonprofit organization with a stated mission of conducting activities concerning the culture and heritage of the Piscataway People. However, absent facts that show a personal benefit to her or her immediate family resulting from the lease, the exercise of her vote as a Commissioner in support of the lease does not amount to an Ethics violation.

Similarly, no facts were provided to show that Coates tribal membership meant that she stood to personally benefit from the approval of a letter of support to a third party requested by the lessee. Conflicts of interest arise when it is foreseeable that the decision would have a direct or indirect financial impact upon a person subject to the Code or a Qualified Relative. Here, the Complainant alleges no such conflict.

Date: 12/24/2024

Shara Hendlar

Shara Hendlar (Dec 10, 2024 16:43 EST)

Shara Hendlar, Chair
Charles County Ethics Commission

Christopher L. Nickerson

Christopher Nickerson, Vice Chair

Sarah Hazeltine

Sarah Hazeltine (Dec 24, 2024 21:23 CST)

Sarah Hazeltine, Member

Angel Riley

Angel Riley (Dec 16, 2024 15:26 EST)

Angel Riley, Member

Maxine Somerville

Maxine Somerville, Member