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Smoller/Grindle: Time is Now for an Ethics Commission

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Smoller/Grindle: Time is Now for an Ethics Commission

Comments

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Smoller/Grindle: Time is Now for an Ethics Commission

by [Fred Smoller and Shirley Grindle](#) Jun 24, 2015 Updated Dec 8, 2020

Orange County is the only major metropolitan jurisdiction in California that does not have an Ethics Commission.

Los Angeles, San Francisco, San Diego, San Jose, Oakland, Ventura County, Kern County and San Bernardino County all do.

These oversight groups were established because of the need to properly enforce local campaign contribution limits. They also oversee conflicts of interest, lobbyist activities and gifting of public officials.

The Orange County Grand Jury and private individuals have repeatedly asked the Orange County Board of Supervisors to set up an Ethics Commission but the Supervisors have steadfastly refused.

The need for an Ethics Commission is vividly illustrated by the felony conviction of former Sheriff Mike Carona, which took federal authorities to bring about, and the sexual harassment charges against Carlos Bustamante, the former head of the Public Works Department and former Santa Ana City Councilman. These charges festered for years because the victims, who were county employees, were reluctant to report the offenses because they feared retaliation.

Recently, the entire District Attorney's office was disqualified from prosecuting an admitted mass murderer by a Superior Court Judge because it illegally used jailhouse informants and hid information from the defense.

A scandal is presently brewing in the OCParks department in which top officials are accused of awarding contracts to friends. Independent auditors have said the county's in-house investigation will be disqualified because it is "riddled with serious conflicts of interest."

Also, there is currently little enforcement of the county's Campaign Reform Ordinance (TINCUP) by the District Attorney.

Nor is there any oversight of either the Gift Ban or the Lobbyist Registration Ordinances.

And there is no recourse available, other than the District Attorney's office, to file any complaint of ethics violations.

For these reasons, a group of citizens have written an ordinance to establish an independent, non-partisan Ethics Commission tasked with overseeing ethics and campaign law violations by county elected and appointed officials and county employees.

The proposed Commission would:

- Receive campaign reports and track contributions of all county elected officials and candidates for county office
- Receive and review complaints alleging violations of county laws related to campaign finance, the gift ban, lobbyist registration and the code of ethics
- Enforce provisions of these laws
- Refer serious violations to other appropriate enforcement agencies

This group will request the Board of Supervisors to place this ordinance on the November 2016 ballot.

Should they decline to do so, there will be no alternative except to run a county-wide initiative which is estimated to cost around \$200,000.

If you are disgusted with the current “business as usual” county political scene and believe an Ethics Commission is needed, please help this effort by contributing to:

Citizens for Orange County Ethics Commission
1537 E. Chapman Ave.
Orange, Calif.92866

ethicscommission4oc.nationbuilder.com/