

Riverbend City ® Activity

Ethical Perspectives

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Introduction

Congratulations. You have just been hired to be Riverbend City's new City Manager. One of your first tasks will be to make recommendations to the mayor on what needs to be included in a new Code of Ethics. This is likely to be a challenging process. There is no standardized way to create a Code of Ethics, and different stakeholders are likely to have very different ideas about what needs to be addressed in the Code.

You will need to speak to a number of stakeholders, consider their opinions on what needs to be included, and synthesize their opinions into your recommendations.

Desk

Riverbend City Community Action Center: Your Office

You have an email from Keith Bauer, the mayor of Riverbend City. You should read this now.

Subject: City Code of Ethics

From: Keith Bauer, Mayor, Riverbend City

Hello,

We're all so excited to have you on board as our new City Manager! You're going to be put to work right away as you tackle the challenging issue of our city's new Code of Ethics. The current code is very outdated and inadequate, and updating it is a high priority. I will need for you to make recommendations to me as to what needs to appear in our city's new Code of Ethics.

You're going to be meeting with a number of stakeholders, who all have strong opinions on what should be in this version of the code. You'll find that there's not a good deal of disagreement between the stakeholders, but that stakeholders have different areas of emphasis that they personally find most important. Ultimately, it will be your task to synthesize their feedback into a cohesive recommendation for me.

To help you out with this task, I've attached PDFs of several cities' Codes of Ethics. Look these over. As you speak to these stakeholders, keep in mind how the issues they discussed were addressed in the other city's codes, and consider whether you think these issues ought to be approached in a similar manner in our code.

Best of luck! I look forward to reading your recommendation.

Warmly,
Keith

Attachments:

Portland Code of Ethics (documents/CodeOfEthics.pdf)

San Antonio Code of Ethics (documents/2013EthicsCode.pdf)

Phoenix Code of Ethics (documents/ethicshandbook.pdf)

Interviews

Riverbend City

See what these stakeholders have to say about what should be included in the city's Code of Ethics.

Robin Gianni

Director of Public Works

It should go without saying that city resources should be used for the benefit of the people and not for anyone's personal benefit—but I *strongly* think we should state this explicitly in the Code of Ethics. In relation to this, there needs to be transparency when it comes to how we are spending taxpayer money, and it needs to be crystal clear to the public that we are doing this with integrity. We've been struggling with budget cuts over the last few years, and that's led to some cuts in some key programs. As you might expect, people are angry about it. I've seen plenty of emails asking us where we've been spending our budget. That's why it's so important that we have transparency. Budget decisions need to be transparent and crystal clear to taxpayers—along with accountability in the tracking process. Because when it all comes down to it, the public needs to understand that city resources are being appropriated with their best interests in mind. And part of doing this is making sure they understand clearly how their money is being spent.

Glen Edwards

Riverbend City Police Chief

There needs to be a strong emphasis in the Code of Ethics about trust, including a clear definition of what trust is and language that makes it clear how much we value trust. City officials always need to behave in a way that fosters trust from the public. If they are not, they're doing something wrong. This is especially true when it comes to issues involving the exercise of power. As the Police Chief, I am painfully aware that not everybody in this city trusts police officers. Obviously we need to do more to fix this than just change the Code of Ethics. But I do think an emphasis on trust in the Code will be a good start, especially if we use the code as part of our training with officers on how we can be better partners with the community. In relation to that, there needs to be a strong emphasis on integrity and honesty, for all departments and government functions. The concepts of integrity and honesty—and how they apply to government—need to be spelled out very clearly in the Code of Ethics. You can't have trust without integrity and honesty. We need to have clear language that forbids government officials from taking advantage of their position to benefit their personal interests, financially or otherwise. We need to clearly address issues such as conflicts of interest.

Chuck Bicking

Riverbend City Fire Chief

The Code of Ethics needs to address the issue of appropriate uses of power. Those of us who are in public safety are keenly aware of this, but this is important for anyone in the city who has the ability to exercise power. City residents need to feel that when power is exerted, it is done so with the public's best interest in mind. I just keep remembering when we had to evacuate the Ruby Lake neighborhood after that chemical spill. The evacuation was mandatory. But not all residents were willing to leave. For one thing, there was fear among undocumented immigrants that the city would use the evacuation as an excuse to round them up, especially if they registered at the Red Cross shelter. We need to help foster a feeling in the city that administrators do not exert power without the public interests in mind. And we need to make sure there are consequences in instances where power is abused. If there are no real consequences, then why would residents trust us? Oh, and in relation to this, we absolutely must have some language in the Code of Ethics about whistle blowers. People need to know that they can and should report activities that are unlawful or improper.

Randy Hogan

Director, Riverbend Senior Services

I've been working in the social services for a long time, and one of the biggest struggles is always the distribution of resources. The reality is that there's never enough to go around to meet everybody's needs 100% of the time, and because of that, people struggle. Because of that, it's crucial that we have ethical standards in place to help guide making objective decisions when about resource distribution. The key term here is objectivity. Too often, politics and personal opinions get in the way when it comes to making decisions about resource distribution, and it's unrealistic to say that we can eliminate this. But we can emphasize the need for distributing resources fairly and objectively in the Code of Ethics. In relation to this, I think we need to have language that states that policymakers need to implement policies in good faith with the people's interest in mind, regardless of their political views. That's crucial.

April Nguyen

Director, Riverbend Community Action

The Code of Ethics needs to address related to diversity, both explicitly and implicitly. To be blunt, there is the general sentiment among communities of color that the system is unfair, and that people of color often lose out. There's the sense that government officials serve themselves and do not serve the people. I think we can start addressing

some of these concerns with more transparency about everything. Transparency about how decisions are made. Transparency about how we spend taxpayers' money. Transparency about elections. We need to make sure the code states explicitly that the leadership of our city promotes open discussion, and that everybody is welcome and encouraged to participate in this kind of discussion. Any language that we can include that promotes leadership that is accountable to the people and eager to listen. That can only help. Also, I think it would be helpful to get feedback from the public about what to include in this Code of Ethics. In addition, I think we need to make this Code of Ethics easily available online, and perhaps also available as a pamphlet.

Peggy Truman

Director, Hennessey County Department of Public Health

From a public health perspective, one of my biggest concerns is confidentiality. We've moved into an era where the government has all kinds of data about our citizens, health records and otherwise. There's great potential for us to use this data in ways that help people. In terms of health records, there's plenty of data that indicates that the sharing of health care information between organizations can save lives. But the other side of this abundance of data is that it can be used in unethical ways. And people are concerned about this. There was a case recently where employees at a One-Stop Center were required to use a Department of Health database to verify birth and citizenship records. Well, employees were refusing to use the database because they were concerned that this information was going to be misused. We need to create a government culture where people trust that data will always be used in ethical ways, and that privacy will be respected. As part of this, data use and confidentiality guidelines need to be part of the Code of Ethics.

Lorraine Collins

Director, Riverbend City Transit System

I think it's important that the code have a customer-centered approach. We need to be cognizant that above all else, we serve the residents of this city. Policies and procedures need to be designed with the needs of the people in mind. Yes, I realize that the term "customer-centered approach" sounds corporate. But that isn't a bad thing. Corporations have the incentive to make sure their products and services are oriented towards their customers, because otherwise, they lose money. As the director of the transit system, we feel incentivized to serve the public as

customers because we provide a service that is vital to people's everyday lives. If we don't provide adequate bus routes, people won't be able to get to their jobs, or to the grocery store, or to the doctor, or to many other places that they need to function at a basic level in society. One of the struggles we've been having is with expanding bus service to the suburbs. More and more jobs are in the suburbs, and more and more immigrants are moving to the suburbs, so there's more of a need to transport people from the city further out. But with some of the wealthier suburbs, there's some disturbing politics are involved, and some difficult barriers have been put up that make it difficult to expand bus service. The easiest path is to not expand our bus service to these suburbs. But we need to remember that we have an ethical obligation to serve our people—our customers—even if that means we have to work a little harder.

Conclusion

You have completed the Riverbend City: Ethical Perspectives activity.

Reflection Questions

What points of overlap did you see in some of the statements from stakeholders?

Your response:

This question has not been answered yet.

The Mayor gave you example Code of Ethics documents to read from several cities. What did you see in these examples that you think would be especially useful in putting together a Code of Ethics for Riverbend City, especially keeping the concerns of these stakeholders in mind?

Your response:

This question has not been answered yet.

What are some points that you think are essential to include in Riverbend City's Code of Ethics?

Your response:

This question has not been answered yet.

When it comes to synthesizing the needs of a disparate group of stakeholders, what do you find most challenging? What strategies do you think are effective in a situation like this one?

Your response:

This question has not been answered yet.

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