

Ethics panel faces staffing complaint

Conflict of interest charge leveled at new committee

By MARIA McBRIDE
BUCCIFERRO

For The Saratogian

MILTON — Complaints of nepotism and conflicts of interest have been made against the new ethics committee created expressly to investigate

nepotism and political influence in town government.

During the public comment period at last week's Town Board meeting, Barbara Kerr asserted that two of the three members appointed to the ethics committee in June have conflicts of interest of their own.

Appointee Sanford Becker is the husband of town assessor Mary Ann Becker, and their

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daughter, Julie Audette, works part time in the assessor's office. Mark Retersdorf serves on the Milton Republican Committee, Kerr said. The third appointee is Eric Smassanow.

When Supervisor Frank Thompson asked if she was "questioning the integrity of these people," Kerr stressed that she was not.

"I know Sanford Becker is a wonderful person; Mary Ann Becker is a wonderful person," Kerr said. But, she continued, the board should go outside town government and political committees to investigate conflict-of-interest concerns.

"You don't audit yourself. You can't investigate yourself," said Kerr, who questioned how the board could "look at nepotism in town and have the employees' husband and father on the committee, someone whose livelihood depends on this relationship."

In May, councilman Frank Blaisdell was named chairman of the ethics committee, which was created after residents presented petitions in April calling for reform.

The committee's mission is

"to investigate the concerns that were expressed and to follow up with revisions of the ethics code," Blaisdell said. The committee would also contact other townships about their ethics policies.

Mike Traver of Responsible Government for Milton presented petitions with 141 signatures at the April Town Board meeting. "Twenty-five percent of the Republican committee are town employees," he said.

The petitions called for the town to prohibit town officials and employees from serving on political committees, which Thompson countered was a Constitutional right.

The petitions also called for the board to "address the issue of nepotism, conflicts of interest" and "eliminate town employees and officers of political parties from appointment to serve on the ethics board."

Having town employees and officials serve on political committees is "not against the law," town attorney James Craig said. Constitutional guarantees such as "freedom of assembly, freedom of association" guarantee those

rights. While municipalities can legislate prohibitions, restrictions have resulted in lawsuits, and judges have issued a wide range of opinions. "The cases are all over the place," Craig said. "We'd have to tread lightly," as "wrongful termination" and other legal issues could be involved.

"Government should be open and transparent," Traver said. Revising the town's ethics laws would level the playing field and allow more people to run for political office.

"We're not trying to limit participation, but open participation. There's less participation in Milton because they don't have a chance to come before the committee for an endorsement," Traver said.

The petitions also called for the town to "establish minimum standards of conduct for town officials, officers and employees and those who have a direct or indirect pecuniary or material benefit from the town, to ensure that the business of town government is free from improper influence that may result in opportunities for personal gain."