

SUBJECT: COUNTY COUNCIL MEMBERS VOTING ON SCHOOL BUDGET

SUMMARY: Council Members who are school district employees or who are married to a school district employee may participate in the deliberations and votes on the school district budget issue since their interest is no greater than that of all other school district employees.

QUESTION: Colleton County Council has raised a question as to whether members of County Council may vote on the school budget. The Council is composed of four members; three are employees of the Colleton County School District and the fourth is the spouse of a School District employee.

DISCUSSION:

This opinion is rendered in response to a letter dated April 14, 1992 requesting an opinion from the State Ethics Commission. The Commission's jurisdiction is limited to the applicability of the Ethics, Government Accountability, and Campaign Reform Act of 1991 (Act No. 248 of 1991; Section 8-13-100 et. seq., as amended, 1976 Code of Laws). This opinion does not supersede any other statutory or regulatory restrictions or procedures which may apply to this situation.

Section 8-13-700(B) provides in part as follows:

(B) No public official, public member, or public employee may make, participate in making, or in any way attempt to use his office, membership, or employment to influence a governmental decision in which he, a member of his immediate family, an individual with whom he is associated, or a business with which he is associated has an economic interest. A public official, public member, or public employee who, in the discharge of his official responsibilities, is required to take an action or make a decision which affects an economic interest of himself, a member of his immediate family an individual with whom he is associated, or a business with which he is associated shall:

(1) prepare a written statement describing the matter requiring action or decisions and the nature of his potential conflict of interest with respect to the action or decision;

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(4) if he is a public official, other than a member of the General Assembly, he shall furnish a copy of the statement to the presiding officer of the governing body of any agency, commission, board, or of any county, municipality, or a

political subdivision thereof, on which he serves, who shall cause the statement to be printed in the minutes and require that the member be excused from any votes, deliberations, and other actions on the matter on which the potential conflict of interest exists and shall cause the disqualification and the reasons for it to be noted in the minutes.

Economic Interest is defined in Section 8-13-100(11) as:

- (a) "Economic interest" means an interest distinct from that of the general public in a purchase, sale, lease, contract, option, or other transaction or arrangement involving property or services in which a public official, public member, or public employee may gain an economic benefit of fifty dollars or more.
- (b) This definition does not prohibit a public official, public member, or public employee from participating in, voting on, or influencing or attempting to influence an official decision if the only economic interest or reasonably foreseeable benefit that may accrue to the public official's, public member's, or public employee's position or which accrues to the public official, public member, or public employee as a member of a profession, occupation, or large class to no greater extent than the economic interest or potential benefit could reasonably be foreseen to accrue to all other members of the profession, occupation, or large class.

Since the four Councilmembers are either school district employees or married to a school district employee, their interest is potentially no greater or less than that of all other members of the group of school employees. Therefore, the State Ethics Commission sees no prohibition against the four Council Members participating in the deliberations and votes on the school district budget issue. The members are advised, however, that issues directly affecting their own economic interests to a greater extent than other members of the school district employee group will necessitate following the procedures of Section 8-13-700(B).