

STATE OF NEW YORK: COUNTY OF SUFFOLK  
SUFFOLK COUNTY BOARD OF ETHICS

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In the Matter of the Inquiry of

██████████

**ADVISORY OPINION**

No. AO-2015-9

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NOTICE: THIS ADVISORY OPINION IS SUBJECT TO REVISION OR WITHDRAWAL. Applications requesting its modification, clarification, or withdrawal must be made in accordance with Suffolk County Board of Ethics rules unless an application for the revision or withdrawal of an advisory opinion is timely received, it shall become final. Nothing shall prohibit the Suffolk County Board of Ethics, on its own motion, from reconsidering, revising or withdrawing an advisory opinion at any time.

**ADVISORY OPINION REQUEST**

1. **Inquiry:** Does a Suffolk County Legislative Aide have to recuse himself on matters where his brother appears as ██████████ before the Suffolk County ██████████ Committee when acting in his official capacity as the Legislator’s designee?

2. **Conclusion:** The Board finds that the Requestor’s brother is an associated person under Suffolk County Code § 77-1. As such, the Requestor’s vote on his brother’s applications to the ██████████ Committee would constitute a personal financial benefit to a person associated with the Requestor and is a clear conflict of interest. As such, the Board, under § 77-7(A) and § 77-7(B), finds that a recusal is necessary.

**LAWS ANALYZED**

3. The Laws of Suffolk County; Suffolk County Administrative Code XXX, Advisory Opinions; and Chapter 77, Sections 77-3(C) and 77-7

**PROCEDURAL HISTORY**

- 4. This Advisory Opinion was requested 6/24/2015.
- 5. Fact finding was concluded on 6/25/2015.

6. The Board deliberated on this Advisory Opinion on 7/1/2015.
7. The Board voted on this Advisory Opinion request on 7/1/2015.

### **INFORMATION PRESENTED TO THE BOARD**

8. The Requestor is a Suffolk County Legislative Aide. (*Requestor's Exhibit#1*).
9. The Requestor's brother, [REDACTED], is the owner of [REDACTED], performs [REDACTED] for Suffolk County, and is on the approved [REDACTED] list for the County. (*Requestor's Exhibits# 1*).
10. The Requestor is Legislator [REDACTED] designee on the Suffolk County [REDACTED] Committee. (*Requestor's Exhibit# 1*).
11. The Requestor's brother will be the [REDACTED] on applications which will require the vote of the Requestor in the scope of his duties as the Legislator's designee at the Suffolk County [REDACTED] Committee meetings.

### **OPINION AND ANALYSIS**

12. In considering this inquiry, the Board employed the following three-step analysis to determine whether a prohibited conflict of interest would exist:
  - a) Does the requestor have standing to obtain an Advisory Opinion from the Suffolk County Board of Ethics;
  - b) Is the requestor seeking advice on proposed future conduct;
  - c) Whether the Requestor voting on a relative's application before the Suffolk County [REDACTED] Committee is a violation of the ethics laws.

### **STANDING**

13. The Board determined that standing exists for this Advisory Opinion request due to the requestor's position as a public servant employed by the Suffolk County Legislature which mandates compliance with the Suffolk County Ethics Laws<sup>1</sup> (*Suffolk County Administrative Code §A30-1*,

Chapter 77, §77-1, NYC COIB Advisory Opinion 2009-4).

## **PROPOSED FUTURE CONDUCT**

14. The Law States in Pertinent Part<sup>2</sup>:

§ A30-3(B). ADVISORY OPINIONS:

*Advisory opinions shall be issued only with respect to proposed future conduct or action by a public servant. A public servant whose conduct or action is the subject of an advisory opinion shall not be subject to penalties or sanctions by virtue of acting or failing to act due to reasonable reliance on the opinion, unless material facts were omitted or misstated in the request for an opinion. The Board may amend a previously issued advisory opinion after giving reasonable notice to the public servant that it is reconsidering its opinion.*

15. The Board determined that as the Requestor has not yet voted on an application of his brother's at the time of the Advisory Opinion request, that the request is regarding proposed future conduct and is within the Board's jurisdiction.

## **POTENTIAL CONFLICTS OF INTEREST**

16. The Law States in pertinent part:

§ 77-3(C). PROHIBITED CONDUCT

C. No public servant shall use his or her official position or office, or take or fail to take any action, in a manner which he or she knows or has reason to know may result in a personal financial benefit to himself or herself, a person or firm associated with the public servant, a customer or client of the public servant or any person from whom the public servant has received a gift or any goods or services for less than fair market value, during the preceding 12 months;

§ 77-7(A). RECUSAL AND DISCLOSURE.

A public servant shall promptly recuse himself or herself from acting on any matter when acting on the matter, or failing to act on the matter, would constitute prohibited conduct under the Code of Ethics or would

financially benefit the public servant, a person or firm associated with the public servant, a customer or client or any person from whom the public servant has received a gift, or any goods or services for less than market value in the preceding 12 months.

(B). Whenever a public servant is required to recuse himself or herself under the Code of Ethics, he or she shall:

- (1) Promptly inform his or her immediate supervisor, if any;
- (2) Promptly file with the Board a signed statement disclosing the nature and extent of the conflict; and
- (3) Immediately refrain from participating further in the particular matter.

#### § 77-1. DEFINITIONS.

Associated: A person or firm associated with a public servant includes a spouse, domestic partner, child, parent or *sibling*; a person with whom the public servant has a business or other financial interest; and each firm in which the public servant has an interest.

17. Given an elected official's statutorily proscribed duty to personally, or by designee, represent his or her constituents, recusal from deliberations should only be required in cases where there is a clear conflict of interest or a clear appearance of a conflict.

As applied, the Board finds that the Requestor's brother is an associated person under § 77-1. Under § 77-3(C) and § 77-7(A), the Board finds that the vendor status of the Requestor's brother in an organization receiving Suffolk County funding, does constitute a personal financial benefit to a person associated with the Requestor and is a clear conflict of interest. As such, the Board, under § 77-7(A) and § 77-7(B), finds that a recusal is necessary as applied to the Requestor's role as the Legislator's designee in the Suffolk County ██████ Committee. (*See NYC Conflicts of Interest Board Advisory Opinion No. 90-04, Peterson v. Corbin*, 713 N.Y.S.2d 361 (2<sup>nd</sup> Dept. 2000), which reversed a lower court preliminary injunction prohibiting legislator from voting on a matter in which it was alleged he had a conflict).

### CONCLUSION

18. As set forth above, the Board finds that pursuant to § 77-3(C) and § 77-7(A) that the

Requestor's failure to recuse under the specific facts set forth to the Board as to his brother's vendor status would be a violation of §77-3(C) and § 77-7(A). As such, the Board, under § 77-7(A) and § 77-7(B), finds that a recusal is necessary as applied to the Requestor's role as the Legislator's designee in the Suffolk County ██████ Committee meetings.

**19.** The Board hereby sets forth that the Requestor shall comply with the recusal procedures set forth in § 77-7(A) and § 77-7(B).

**20.** Pursuant to Suffolk County Board of Ethics Resolution 004/2013 passed on January 30, 2013, the requester shall have 15 business days from the time this Advisory Opinion has been rendered (excluding Saturday, Sunday, or a legal holiday) to file a request for reconsideration supported by new material facts submitted to the Board.

**21.** The forgoing is the opinion of the Board.

Dated: Great River, New York  
7/1/2015

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Linda A. Spahr, Esq. – Acting Chair

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<sup>1</sup> N.Y. Gen Mun. Law § 810 (6). Additional definitions; Suffolk County §77-1 definitions

<sup>2</sup> N.Y. Gen Mun. Law § 800: Article 18 of the New York General Municipal Law establishes standards of ethical conduct that are mandatory for officers and employees within the State of New York.