

COMMISSION MEMBERS

James Hester, FAICP
Chair

Toni Drake, Esq.
Vice Chair

Robert Scaggs

Karen Lubieniecki

Lynne Sport



CITY OF LAUREL ETHICS COMMISSION

8103 Sandy Spring Road • Laurel, Maryland 20707 (301) 725-5300
Internet Address: <https://www.cityoflaurel.org/1458/Laurel-Ethics-Commission>

COMMISSION STAFF

Christian L. Pulley CPM
*City Administrator
Executive Officer*

Dennis Whitley III, Esq
Counsel to the Commission

Laura Christoplos
Administrative Assistant II

**Laurel Ethics Commission
Meeting Minutes
Tuesday, June 17, 2025
Virtual Meeting by Zoom**

The Ethics Commission Meeting was called to order at 6:06 pm by Chairman James Hester. Roll was called with the following Commissioners present: Chairman James Hester, Commissioners Toni Drake, and Karen Lubieniecki, and Alternate Lynne Sport. Commissioner Robert Scaggs was not present. There was a quorum. Also present were Executive Officer Christian Pulley, Counsel to the Ethics Commission Dennis Whitley, and Administrative Assistant Laura Christoplos.

Chair Hester announced that Vice Chair Bardwell has resigned from the Commission effective June 16, 2025. She has taken a position as Prince George's County Chief Administrative Officer, which she felt would conflict with her duties on the Ethics Commission.

Chair Hester would like to have the Mayor's Office send her a letter thanking her for her service. He would also like to have a medallion or plaque made thanking her for her long service to the City. Administrator Pulley said that she had spoken to the Mayor's Office, and they plan to write a letter. She said that she will be sending her something as well, on behalf of the Administration. The Commission is welcome to do something as well.

Chair Hester stated his wish that the Mayor fill the opening on the Ethics Commission sooner rather than later. Administrator Pulley assured him that the City will be advertising for a number of openings.

Ms. Christoplos asked the Commissioners to keep track of the time they spend working on Ethics business, and submit it to her. The City's Volunteer Office is tracking volunteer time more closely now.

On a motion by Commissioner Lubieniecki, seconded by Commissioner Drake, the agenda for the June 17, 2025, meeting was unanimously approved as written.

On a motion by Commissioner Lubieniecki, seconded by Commissioner Sport, meeting minutes from the October 10, 2024, meeting were approved as written. Commissioner Drake abstained since she was not in attendance.

Commissioner Lubieniecki nominated Chair Hester for another term as Chair of the Commission. Commissioner Drake seconded the nomination, and Chair Hester was re-elected by unanimous voice vote. Chair Hester abstained from the vote.

Commissioner Lubieniecki nominated Commissioner Drake as Vice Chair. It was seconded by Commissioner Sport. Commissioner Drake was elected by voice vote with Commissioner Drake abstaining.

Commissioner Sport went over the subcommittee reviews. Commissioner Lubieniecki asked about an answer from Director Williams of the Communications Department. The answer referred to not having the City of Laurel as a client of her personal business. The question referred to having clients who did business with the City. Staff will get clarity from her tomorrow. Vice Chair Drake asked if this came up with the last Communications Director. Administrator Pulley clarified that the last Communications Director had failed to disclose her business on the Financial Disclosure Statement (FDS). The current Director disclosed her business, but did not answer the question as asked.

Staff will revise the form to avoid some common mistakes.

Deadlines for correcting mistakes were discussed. Vice Chair Drake brought up people who make the same mistake year after year. In the past, a memo was sent to the Chair of the person's Commission, stating they could not participate in Commission business until the errors were corrected. She asked if it would be easier if we set up a day to answer questions for Commissioners who were not sure of their answers.

Commissioner Lubieniecki suggested public announcement after a certain period. Public embarrassment can be an effective tool. Chair Hester suggested putting it on the Ethics Commission web page. Vice Chair Drake felt the web page was not public enough. Perhaps a public service announcement would work. Mr. Whitley suggested a public report at a Mayor and City Council meeting. That would put it in the public record. Commissioner Sport wanted to disaggregate different problems. Some people are delinquent. There are some minor mistakes and misunderstandings. There are some repeated mistakes. She suggested various approaches rather than a one size fits all approach.

Chair Hester asked when we should start the clock on the \$5.00 per day fine. He emphasized the importance of not showing favoritism, or of being perceived as showing favoritism. Commissioner Sport suggested 21 days, which was clarified to 21 calendar days from being notified. Mr. Whitley suggested that it be 21 days from the date that the Commission takes an action.

Commissioner Lubieniecki made a motion that our policy will be that someone with deficiencies in their FDS will have 21 days from the date of notification to correct their FDS, or \$5.00 per day fines will be implemented, and they will be reported to the Mayor and City Council and Chairs of the relevant Board or Commission. Commissioner Sport seconded the motion.

Commissioner Lubieniecki asked why Department Heads are not required to fill out the long form. Counsel Whitley said that, without having done any research, it's probably a State issue since these are model State documents. It would probably be the same throughout the State. Administrator Pulley thought it would require a memo from the Mayor or a change in the Ordinance. Counsel Whitley would like to do some research. Administrator Pulley asked him to do due diligence on the subject for the next meeting.

Commissioner Sport felt that Department Heads would have even more opportunities for conflicts of interest than City officials. Vice Chair Drake feels it makes sense to have them fill out the long form.

Commissioner Lubieniecki made a motion that we move forward to explore the possibility of having Department Heads fill out the long form, and asked staff to take the lead on that with the Commission advising. Vice Chair Drake seconded the motion, which was passed by a unanimous voice vote.

A voice vote was taken on the motion regarding a 21-day period before imposing fines if

corrections are not submitted. It passed unanimously.

Chair Hester would like to have a place to post information about those who owe the City money, especially long term, and outstanding debts. Perhaps it could be posted on the web site. Commissioner Lubieniecki commented that the two cases in question are different in that one of the people is no longer local. Chair Hester felt that both would have to be cited so as not to create the perception of bias. Commissioner Sport suggested taking this in steps. She likes the idea of public announcements at Mayor and City Council meetings. She does not care for full public disclosure. She does not feel it warrants that kind of public shaming. Commissioner Lubieniecki feels that a report to the Council makes the issue public enough in an appropriate format to start with. Vice Chair Drake clarified that this would not be done right off the bat.

Commissioner Sport came back to the issue of not allowing N/A on the forms. She does not feel that it is a practical rule. Chair Hester asked Counsel Whitley whether abbreviations were acceptable on other legal documents. Counsel Whitley said that, as a rule, they are not, but there may be some circumstances where they are. He stated that if this is a major point of contention with reference to the documents being complete, or requiring follow up, this may be a case for following the exception rather than the rule. Chair Hester suggested including N/A in the instructions as an allowable answer.

Vice Chair Drake feels strongly that even “Not Applicable” is not a valid answer, since all of the questions do apply to those filling out the form. Counsel Whitley asked if this was a major issue. The Commissioners said it comes up often.

Commissioner Sport moved that the form be revised to allow None, N/A, and Not Applicable as allowable answers. Commissioner Lubieniecki seconded the motion, and it was passed by a unanimous voice vote.

Bharati Dhruva, of the Arts Council, requested that the Ethics Commission waive her fine. She was out of the country from mid-February to mid-April, and was ill after she returned. The form was sent to her two weeks before she left, and she was back two weeks before the form was due. It was submitted 13 days late. Staff invited her to this meeting, but she did not attend.

Commissioners discussed whether this was a valid reason for the late submission of her FDS. They did not think so. Commissioner Sport moved that the waiver be declined. Commissioner Lubieniecki seconded the motion, and it was passed by a unanimous voice vote. Chair Hester

asked staff to inform her of the Commission's decision.

Chair Hester brought up the offer to the Mayor and City Council to do a 15-minute briefing by one or more of the Commissioners. Commissioner Lubieniecki suggested that Department Heads might want to attend if they will be required to fill out the long form. Administrator Pulley agreed. She suggested doing it after the elections. Staff suggested recording the briefing and putting it on the web page for reference.

Administrator Pulley thanked the Commissioners, especially the subcommittee, for all of their work.

There was discussion of scheduling the next meeting in late July. Administrator Pulley will suggest a date.

The general public meeting was opened at 7:15 pm and closed at 7:15 pm, with no one wanting to speak.

Commissioner Lubieniecki made a motion to adjourn, and Commissioner Sport seconded it. The meeting was adjourned at 7:16 pm