

DEPARTMENTS

Ethics Inquiries

Will His Wife Sign the Councilmember's Petition?

Scenario: There is fierce competition for the city council in the upcoming election, with six of the seven seats open to candidates. One newly appointed councilmember approached the city manager to ask if the manager would be willing to sign his nomination petition. The manager explained that the ICMA Code of Ethics prohibited him from taking a position in the race, including signing a nomination petition. The councilmember accepted that explanation but went on with another request: Would the manager's wife sign his nomination petition?

The city manager told him that it would be inadvisable for the councilmember to ask his wife because that could give an appearance that the city manager favored one councilmember over another. Unfortunately, this response did not go over well with the councilmember. He was not impressed with the city manager's logic and seemed offended. What can the manager do to help the council understand the dilemma of getting his wife involved in the local election campaign?

Response: The city manager handled the request properly by explaining his obligations under the ICMA Code of Ethics and sharing his discomfort over the councilmember's request that the manager's wife sign his petition. At the same time, the prohibitions against political activity involving political candidates only apply to ICMA members. If the councilmember decides to approach the manager's wife directly, it will be up to her to decide whether or not to sign the nomination petition. Often, the family of a local government manager is sympathetic to the pressures that go with public service and will stay out of controversial political activities, especially when a request involves the local council election. She may decide not to sign the petition, understanding that it could create problems for her husband.

With so many new elected officials coming onto the council, the city manager may want to take some time during the council's orientation to give them an overview of the ICMA Code of Ethics and of his professional responsibilities to it.