

Upholding our **ETHICAL STANDARDS**

BY GLENN W. BRIDGER

Want a loan you can't afford? How much is a Senate Seat worth to you? Does a sure-fire investment—one that you can only get in on by knowing the right people—sound appealing?

You might say that our politicians, loan officers and investment firms are not typically known for their high ethical standards. Then again, the right of way profession has suffered some ethical setbacks over the years as well. From alignment decisions to valuation, negotiations and property management, corruption has historically tempted the highway industry and right of way as a profession.

One example of this dates back to the early 1960s. The Interstate Highway program, including the various right of way activities required for such a vast undertaking, came under scrutiny and became the focus of Congressional investigations. At the time, I was a new federal right of way employee, and the infamous Blatnik hearings surrounded the Interstate Highway Program. Named after the Minnesota Congressman John Blatnik, who chaired the committee, the transcripts were considered required reading.

Throughout the testimony, there was evidence of ethics run amuck. Negotiators had been delivering payment checks and receiving cash back from property owners when the money was paid. Appraisers had used a property's recent purchase price as evidence of value, even though it was a "friendly" transaction and made solely to influence the price to be paid by the state. Property management agents were billing for services and repairs that were never done. Unbelievably, the list goes on!

As a result, states later made important changes in how they conducted business. The Federal Highway Administration (then known as the Bureau of Public Roads) enacted stringent rules. A former FBI agent was assigned a major role in the BPR focusing on audits and investigations, and in right of way in particular. Wrong-doings were reported and carefully investigated. For those who sold land for Federal-aid highways, follow-up interviews were routinely conducted to determine whether there was a request for a kickback or any other sign of irregularities in the transaction. The goal was to make this line of questioning appear routine, and not a reflection upon the people with whom they had been working.

Did these new stringent rules and follow-up procedures work to eliminate all ethics failures in the BPR right of way process? Not really. Professional training, professional pride, and personal integrity are still required in order to affect this type of change. And even with strong oversight, bad seeds may still find their way into our organizations.

Let me share a couple of examples. In New Jersey in the early 1970's, it was common to see a red Ferrari parked in the Chief Engineer's parking space, located in the parking lot behind the New Jersey Department of Transportation Headquarters. Now, despite the fact that New Jersey was a regular stop for FHWA investigators during my tenure from 1967 to 1973, it was not until much later that the Ferrari owner was finally linked to corruption.

At one point while working in another state, I discovered that a District Right of Way Chief processed a bill for a new furnace in a state-purchased house. The files looked good, as I had personally reviewed the case and found no flags telling me to pursue the matter further or interview parties to the property management transaction. Yet, the transaction was a sham, and the money had gone straight into his pockets. A kind, straight-laced gentleman, he let his

wife's bingo habit push him into this criminal activity, which the state ultimately uncovered.

Let me assure you that I do not raise these examples simply to emphasize the many ways we might violate our ethical standards. Rather, my goal is to reinforce the need for all of us to perform our jobs in a manner that minimizes the opportunities—for ourselves and others—to violate our ethics, or even to give the appearance of violating those ethics.

Our profession has made major strides since the early 1960s. In fact, the majority of our members may be totally unfamiliar with the Blatnik Committee, which at the time, was seared on the minds of new professionals employed by the Highway Administration. It is my hope that we never again have a recurrence of that period of ethics violations. Adhering to high ethical standards is not simply a core value of our Association. It is a reflection on each of us as individuals and enables us to build trust and confidence within our communities and organizations. ♣

