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Ethics board in Teaneck to hire attorney for complaints

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TEANECK – The township ethics board plans to hire an attorney to review legal issues related to complaints it has received against public officials, the board's chairman said.

The board also may create an action plan to ensure that financial disclosure forms – which are required of all public officers – are filed on time each year, the chairman, Leonard Fuld, said Thursday, a day after the board held its annual administrative meeting.

Though the original purpose of the meeting was for the board to review administrative issues, the meeting on Wednesday was unique in that the board had three complaints to consider, all of which involved alleged issues with various public officials' financial disclosure filings with the state. It had been more than two decades since the board last received a complaint, Fuld said.

One complaint was filed against Councilman Alan Sohn in the form of an anonymous letter. The writer noted that Sohn had filed his financial disclosure late and also questioned why Sohn is receiving Social Security disability payments "at such a young age."

Fuld said the complaint was not valid and largely raised issues that are beyond the board's scope.

"For the board to address the complaint it has to be signed and filed properly," Fuld said.

However, Fuld said that the board can review the allegation that Sohn was late in filing his financial disclosure forms.

The other two complaints – one filed by a resident named Tom Abbott and the other by a resident whom Fuld did not identify – were similar to each other, the chairman said. Abbott's complaint alleged that Deputy Mayor Elie Katz had not filed his financial disclosure forms properly and left out the names of some businesses he owns. Abbott also alleged that various other public officers had not filed their financial disclosure forms as required.

Fuld said the board decided to hire outside counsel – an attorney who does not work in Bergen County – to review legal questions related to the complaints. The board also will confer with township officials on administrative issues, including whether public officials are notified of filing deadlines.

The board did not take specific actions related to the complaints, but it may, once it receives answers from township administration and the attorney, Fuld said.

The board also may create an action plan to ensure that financial disclosure forms are filed on time, Fuld said.

"They're all going to be addressed similarly," Fuld said.

Sohn and Katz did not attend the meeting – both were at a special council meeting at the same time in the adjacent building, voting to select a new council member to fill the seat left vacant by the death last month of Mayor Lizette Parker.

Sohn said Thursday that the writer of the letter was motivated more by a desire to attack Sohn personally in the weeks before Teaneck's non-partisan election on May 10 than by a legitimate interest in raising an ethical issue. The letter questioned Sohn's mental capacity to serve as a council member.

"This was the dirtiest election in my Teaneck history," said Sohn, a township resident for more than 20 years who was not on the May 10 ballot and had aligned himself with a slate of challengers.

In an email, Katz said he takes the filing of the disclosure forms "very seriously" and has filed them annually for the past 18 years. "Any errors or clarification to my filing has or will be corrected," Katz said.

Abbott said Thursday he is still concerned about how his complaints will be handled and said that any guilty party should be fined. He said he hopes the complaints will remind public officers to file their forms and that, "in the future, people will not ignore their responsibilities."

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