

TEANECK

Teaneck ethics board asks to disband

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TEANECK — The township ethics board, which has heard just a handful of complaints over the past two decades, is asking to be disbanded.

But Teaneck officials say they want to await the outcome of pending legislation that would abolish local ethics boards altogether and leave ethics complaints filed against public officials in the hands of the state Ethics Commission.

“Thankfully we’ve really had almost no issues to deal with,” said Leonard Fuld, who leads the board. “If there ever should come a real issue, it would probably be handled best by a third party, not by people who might know the people involved.”

The local board, which meets once a year unless a complaint is filed, reviews and holds hearings on complaints that allege violations of the municipal ethics code or financial disclosure requirements.

The board must notify the appropriate authority of any violations that warrant a criminal investigation. The group can also suggest that the Township Council levy a small financial penalty or issue a letter of admonishment for lesser violations, said Fuld, who has been on the board about 15 years.

Teaneck: The tiny, speckled eggs on a Teaneck soccer field have hatched

Student: Teaneck student wins first place in worldwide video contest

Votee Park: Teaneck playground dedicated in memory of the Trinidad family

In 2016, the board heard three complaints — its first cases since the 1990s. All three alleged issues with public officials’ financial disclosure filings with the state. After reviewing the matter, the board issued letters advising those officials that they must file disclosures on time.

Before then, Fuld said the last time the board dealt with a complaint was in 1994, when it found that former Mayor John Abraham had failed to disclose his ties to a municipal contractor.

The required annual meeting wastes time and resources, Fuld said, because legally it must be advertised. There are also potential conflicts of interest on the local level.

After years of inactivity, its membership has dwindled from six members to four.

Teaneck is one of just 34 towns in the state with a local ethics board. The state Local Finance Board reviews complaints in municipalities that do not have their own ethics boards.

Township officials were receptive to the board's request to disband, but said they first wanted to see the outcome of a bill sponsored by state Sen. Tom Kean Jr. that would eliminate local ethics boards and instead have the state shoulder those responsibilities.

"It makes sense not to waste volunteers' time with this if there are other higher boards that could handle it," Deputy Mayor Mark Schwartz said.

The bill passed the state Senate in 2016 but the Assembly chose not to act. Kean reintroduced the legislation and it has been referred to the Senate's State Government Committee.

"We've seen there's some inconsistency and inaction among the local boards," Kean said. "The expectation is that greater consistency and greater transparency would happen at the state level."

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