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Teaneck ethics board gets its first cases since the 1990s

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TEANECK — The township's ethics board will hold its annual meeting this week, but this year's gathering will be different. For the first time in more than two decades, according to its chairman, the board has complaints to review.

Leonard Fuld, who leads the board, said its members will convene for their annual administrative meeting on Wednesday. He confirmed that the board will have complaints to review, though he declined to discuss how many have been filed and against whom.

Teaneck has a code of ethics that applies to its local government officers and employees. Among the board's roles is to review and hold hearings on complaints alleging violations of the municipal ethics code or financial disclosure requirements and to notify the appropriate authority of any violations that warrant a criminal investigation, according to the state statute that governs such boards. When presented with a complaint, the board must notify the sender that it received the complaint within 30 days and then determine whether it intends to investigate.

Fuld, who has been on the board for about 10 years, said he thought 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.

Abraham appealed the decision, but a three-judge appeals panel upheld the ruling in 2002.

"It's unusual," Fuld said of the fact that the board will be reviewing complaints this year. The body is supposed to have six members but currently has only five, according to the township's website.

It is unclear what the board will review on Wednesday or whether action will be taken. No formal agenda for the meeting had been posted to the township's website as of Monday afternoon, though a notice last week announcing the meeting said its purpose is to "allow the ethics board to meet and review ethics complaints" and that action may be taken. Acting Township Clerk Issa Abbasi did not respond to email messages asking for confirmation of specific complaints that have been filed with the board.

Fuld said any review of complaints at the meeting Wednesday might occur behind closed doors.

At a council meeting last month, Councilman Alan Sohn publicly addressed an anonymous letter that had been sent to the state Department of Community Affairs regarding his financial disclosure form. The letter not only pointed out that the form was filed late, it also questioned Sohn's receipt of Social Security disability payments and whether Sohn is mentally capable to serve as a councilman. Sohn at the meeting did not disclose what is preventing him from working but said his privacy had been violated. Sohn tied the letter to the recent council election, though he was not a candidate.

A representative for the state Department of Community Affairs — it oversees the Local Finance Board, which reviews ethics complaints in municipalities that do not have their own ethics boards — has said the matter must first be taken up by Teaneck.

It was not clear if the complaint against Sohn would be taken up by the ethics board on Wednesday.

Sohn declined to comment on the meeting when he was reached on Monday, saying he believes it is too early to tell whether his complaint will be reviewed by the board.

One resident, Tom Abbott, said he filed two complaints with the board in April. On Monday, he said he has not been told whether his complaints will be heard or investigated. One alleges that Deputy Mayor Elie Katz left out information on his financial disclosure filings, and another relates to an alleged lack of financial disclosure filings for various members of township boards. Katz last week amended his filings after a reporter asked him about the complaint, saying that he was not aware that one had been filed.

The ethics board will meet at 8 p.m. in the lower level conference room of the township's administration building at 818 Teaneck Road. At the same time in the council chambers, there will be a special council meeting to address the vacancy created by the death of Mayor Lizette Parker last month.



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