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Keeping Officials Honest

AN initiative petition drive is going on to create an Oklahoma Ethics Commission and to require public officials to disclose their financial interests.

Objectives are to encourage the election of honest officials and to make it difficult for the dishonest ones to stay in office.

The petition calls for a constitutional amendment to establish the ethics commission, which would review annual financial statements that would be required of elected and appointed officials.

The amendment would prohibit people occupying all covered offices from using those positions for private advancement or gain or to secure personal privileges. Substantial penalties would be provided for "conflict of interest" violations.

Perhaps the reason sponsors of the petition launched such a drive is that they suspect such things may be going on. Otherwise they might not have undertaken the difficult task of securing the signatures of 150,000 voters, or more.

The question is whether a constitutional amendment would ensure the opportunity to vote for honest candidates or keep them honest once they were elected, or appointed, to public offices.

It is a matter of conjecture as to whether financial-disclosure laws would have avoided the county commissioner kickback scandals or revealed their existence at earlier dates. The monies so paid were not usually made a matter of record anywhere.

It appeared in disposition of cases against accused commissioners that a majority reasoned that since it was common practice for those dealing with counties to make such payments, it was acceptable for those involved to take them.

The commissioners generally were men of respectable standing in their communities. They won the confidence of voters time after time but did not seem to feel they were doing wrong by accepting the bribes. Their greed overcame whatever conscientious reluctance they may have had to doing wrong.

"Character witnesses" testified to the integrity of some commissioners in the face of incriminating evidence to the contrary. Likewise, the governor and a congressman testified in federal court that the speaker and majority leader of the state House of Representatives were "truthful and law-abiding citizens," but the jury convicted both on charges of election fraud.

The proposed ethics commission would consist of people appointed by the governor, the lieutenant governor, attorney general, auditor-inspector, and state treasurer. The appointers would be among those officials the commissioners would be assigned to watch. It would take courage for a commissioner to accuse his sponsor.

The voters' best protection always has been to encourage honorable people to run for public office, and, whenever one proves unfit for the position he holds, "to throw the rascal out."