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Dane County supervisors propose expanded lobbying rules for county employees

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Dane County Board supervisors are attempting to limit outside influences generated by county employees by amending the county's current lobbying.

Dane County employees may not lobby the county Board of Supervisors or other administrative agencies under a proposed ordinance amendment that attempts to limit outside influences generated by county employees.

The ordinance, introduced at the County Board's May 4 meeting, expands regulation of county employees' lobbying activities from state and federal administrative agencies to include activities before any governmental body. Dane County Board Chair Sharon Corrigan, a sponsor of the proposal, said the board welcomes outside opinions, but they should not be generated by county staff members.

"It's more that a director or someone couldn't direct their staff to reach out or talk to a constituent group and generate letters to the County Board on behalf of a position the County Board is considering," Corrigan said. "That should be independent groups."

As defined by the proposed amended ordinance, lobbying means to take a position for or against a legislative proposal or a proposed item of business before any governmental body. It would not include responding to a request for information or giving an opinion when requested by members of a governmental body.

If adopted, county employees would not be allowed to represent their position on matters pending before any governmental body as an official county position or make an appearance on paid county time, excluding a compensated vacation or holiday.

The new rules would also apply to personal contacts between Dane County employees and individual members of governmental bodies when the purpose is to present a position on pending legislation or administrative rules.

Dane County Executive Joe Parisi characterized the changes as an attempt to “muzzle public employees.” He said in an emailed statement he cannot support the proposed amendment.

“It’s common practice for managers and staff to share their thoughts on issues they’re working on; I think it’s a useful part of policy development,” Parisi said. “Subjecting a county employee to discipline simply because they disagree with you sounds a lot like what’s going on at the Wisconsin DNR.”

Employees found in violation of the proposed amendment could be suspended with or without pay, denied a merit step increase, demoted, have their pay reduced, discharged or issued a written reprimand.

County employees can lobby on paid time if their position is approved by the County Board or by a committee designated by the board. When employees are on their own time, they can engage in lobbying activities but must disclose that their position does not represent Dane County.

“We recognize we have staff involved in many organizations in the county and welcome their involvement and feel like that is part of being a citizen in the county and being involved,” Corrigan said, noting that they should not use their county resources or position to push for a personal position.

Corrigan said there will likely be some changes to the proposed ordinance amendment, which will be reviewed by the Personnel and Finance Committee at its next meeting on Monday, May 22. She filed a substitute version of the amendment that would exclude employee appearances before any county entity as a representative or a collective bargaining unit or employee group.

The County Board would vote after the finance committee's decision.

Supervisor Jenni Dye, who is also the research director for liberal group One Wisconsin Now, recognized the importance of protecting the ability for people to speak out on issues and the distinction between on and off county time.

“The important part is making sure there is a clear line between things people are engaging in on their personal time and things they are engaging in as an employee,” Dye said.

She said the county has not had significant issues in the past with lobbying, but there have been isolated incidents that have raised questions.

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