

# *Can I vote?*

**A Basic Overview  
Of Public Officials'  
Obligations Under the  
Political Reform Act's  
Conflict-of-Interest Rules**



**California  
Fair Political  
Practices  
Commission**

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***“My home is near the proposed new shopping mall. Can I vote on the issue at next month’s Planning Commission meeting?”***

Many of you may have been confronted with such questions. This booklet is offered by the FPPC as a general overview of your obligations under the Political Reform Act’s conflict-of-interest rules. Using non-technical terms, the booklet is aimed at helping you understand your obligations at the “big picture” level and to help guide you to more detailed resources.

Stripped of legal jargon:

➤ You have a conflict of interest with regard to a particular government decision if it is sufficiently likely that



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the outcome of the decision will have an important impact on your economic interests, **and**

➤ a significant portion of your jurisdiction does not also feel the important impact on their economic interests.

The voters who enacted the Political Reform Act by ballot measure in 1974 judged such circumstances to be enough to influence, or to appear to others to influence, your judgment with regard to that decision.

The most important thing you can do to comply with this law is to learn to recognize the economic interests from which a conflict of interest can arise. No one ever has a conflict of interest under the Act “on general principles” or because of personal bias regarding a person or subject. A conflict of interest can only arise from particular kinds of economic interests, which are explained in non-technical terms later in this booklet.

### *An important note...*

You should not rely solely on this booklet to ensure compliance with the Political Reform Act, but should also consult the Act and Commission regulations. The Political Reform Act is set forth at Cal. Gov. Code §§81000-91014, and the Fair Political Practices Commission regulations are contained in Title 2, Division 6 of the California Code of Regulations. Both the Act and regulations are available on the FPPC’s web site, <http://www.fppc.ca.gov>. Persons with obligations under the Act or their authorized representatives are also encouraged to call the FPPC toll-free advice line — **1-866-ASK-FPPC** — as far in advance as possible.

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If you learn to understand these interests and to spot potential problems, the battle is mostly won because you can then seek help on the more technical details of the law from your agency's legal counsel or from the California Fair Political Practices Commission. **The Commission's toll-free advice line is 1-866-ASK-FPPC (1-866-275-3772).**

Under rules adopted by the FPPC, deciding whether you have a financial conflict of interest under the Political Reform Act is an eight-step process. If you methodically think through the steps whenever there may be a problem, you can avoid most — if not all — mistakes. These steps are spelled out and explained in general terms in this booklet.

**If you learn nothing else from this booklet, remember these things:**

- **This law applies only to financial conflicts of interest; that is, conflicts of interest arising from economic interests.**
- **Whether you have a conflict of interest that disqualifies you depends heavily on the facts of each governmental decision.**
- **The most important proactive step you can take to avoid conflict of interest problems is learning to recognize the economic interests from which conflicts of interest can arise.**

On the next page are the eight steps:

## *Eight steps to help you decide*



**Step One:** Are you a “public official” within the meaning of the rules?

**Step Two:** Are you making, participating in making, or influencing a governmental decision?

**Step Three:** What are your economic interests? That is, what are the possible sources of a financial conflict of interest?

**Step Four:** Are your economic interests directly or indirectly involved in the governmental decision?

**Step Five:** What kinds of financial impacts on your economic interests are considered important enough to trigger a conflict of interest?

**Step Six:** The important question: Is it substantially likely that the governmental decision will result in one or more of the materiality standards being met for one or more of your economic interests?

**Step Seven:** If you have a conflict of interest, does the “public generally” exception apply?

**Step Eight:** Even if you have a disqualifying conflict of interest, is your participation legally required?

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Next, here is a non-technical explanation of each:

## **Public Official**

### **Step One — Are you a “public official,” within the meaning of the rules?**

The Act’s conflict-of-interest rules apply to “public officials” as defined in the law. This first step in the analysis is usually a formality — you are probably a public official covered by the rules. If you are an elected official or an employee of a state or local government agency who is designated in your agency’s conflict-of-interest code, you are a “public official.” If you file a Statement of Economic Interests (Form 700) each year, you are a “public official” under the Act (even if you are not required to file a Form 700, in some cases you may still be considered a public official because the definition covers more than specifically designated employees). The cases that are tougher to determine typically involve consultants, investment managers and advisers, and public-private partnerships. If you have any doubts, contact your agency’s legal counsel or the FPPC.

## **Governmental Decision**

### **Step Two — Are you making, participating in making, or influencing a governmental decision?**

The second step in the process is deciding if you are engaging in the kind of conduct regulated by the

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conflict-of-interest rules. The Act's conflict-of-interest rules apply when you:

- **Make** a governmental decision (for example, by voting or making an appointment).
- **Participate** in making a governmental decision (for example, by giving advice or making recommendations to the decision-maker).
- **Influence** a governmental decision (for example, by communicating with the decision-maker).

A good rule of thumb for deciding whether your actions constitute making, participating in making, or influencing a governmental decision is to ask yourself if you are exercising *discretion* or *judgment* with regard to the decision. If the answer is “yes,” then your conduct with regard to the decision is very probably covered.

### **When you have a conflict — Regulation 18702.5 (special rule for section 87200 public officials)**

Government Code section 87105 and regulation 18702.5 outline a procedure that public officials specified in section 87200 must follow for disclosure of economic interests when they have a conflict of interest at a public meeting. The full text of this law and regulation may be viewed in the Library and Publications section of the FPPC's website at <http://www.fppc.ca.gov>.

Public officials specified in section 87200 of the Government Code, such as council members, planning commissioners, and boards of supervisors, must pub-

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licly identify in detail the economic interest that creates the conflict, step down from the dais **and must then leave the room**. This identification must be following the announcement of the agenda item to be discussed or voted upon, but before either the discussion or vote commences.

Additionally, the disqualified official may not be counted toward achieving a quorum while the item is being discussed.

The identification of the conflict and economic interest must be made orally and shall be made part of the public record.

***Exceptions:***

- If the decision is to take place during a closed session, the identification of the economic interest must be made during the public meeting prior to the closed session but is limited to a declaration that the official has a conflict of interest. The economic interest that is the basis for the conflict need not be disclosed. The official may not be present during consideration of the closed session item and may not obtain or review any non-public information regarding the decision.
- A public official is not required to leave the room for an agenda item on the consent calendar provided that the official recuses himself or herself and publicly discloses the economic interest as described above.

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- A public official may speak as a member of the general public only when the economic interest that is the basis for the conflict is a personal economic interest, for example, his or her personal residence or wholly owned business. The official must leave the dais to speak from the same area as the members of the public and may listen to the public discussion of the matter.

**Examples:**

— *The Arroyo City Council is considering widening the street in front of council member Smith’s personal residence, which he solely owns. Council member Smith must disclose on the record that his home creates a conflict of interest preventing him from participating in the vote. He must leave the dais but can sit in the public area, speak on the matter as it applies to him and listen to the public discussion.*

— *Planning Commissioner Garcia is a greater than 10% partner in an engineering firm. The firm represents a client who is an applicant on a project pending before the planning commission. Commissioner Garcia must publicly disclose that the applicant is a source of income to her requiring her recusal. Commissioner Garcia must step down from the dais and leave the room. Since this is not a personal interest that is the basis for the conflict, she **may not** sit in the public area and listen to the discussion.*

— *Supervisor Robertson rents a home to a county employee. The county employee is the sub-*

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*ject of a disciplinary matter in a closed session of the Board of Supervisors. During the open session prior to adjourning to closed session, Supervisor Robertson announces that he must recuse himself from participating in the closed session **but does not disclose that the reason for his recusal is a source of income nor does he name the county employee that is the source of income to him.** He may not attend the closed session or obtain any non-public information from the closed session.*

## Economic Interests

### **Step Three — What are your economic interests? That is, what are the possible sources of a financial conflict of interest?**

From a practical point of view, this third step is the most important part of the law for you. The Act's conflict-of-interest provisions apply only to conflicts of interest arising from economic interests. There are six kinds of such economic interests from which conflicts of interest can arise:

- **Business Investment.** You have an economic interest in a business entity in which you, your spouse, your registered domestic partner, or your dependent children or anyone acting on your behalf has invested \$2,000 or more.
- **Business Employment or Management.** You have an economic interest in a business entity for which you are a director, officer, partner, trustee, employee, or hold any position of management.

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- **Real Property.** You have an economic interest in real property in which you, your spouse, your registered domestic partner, or your dependent children or anyone acting on your behalf has invested \$2,000 or more, and also in certain leasehold interests.

*“The most important thing you can do to comply with this law is to learn to recognize the economic interests from which a conflict of interest can arise.”*

- **Sources of Income.** You have an economic interest in anyone, whether an individual or an organization, from whom you have received (or from whom you have been promised) \$500 or more in income within 12 months prior to the decision about which you are concerned. When thinking about sources of income, keep in mind that you have a community property interest in your spouse’s or registered domestic partner’s income — a person from whom your spouse or registered domestic partner receives income may also be a source of a conflict of interest to you. Also keep in mind that if you, your spouse, your registered domestic partner or your dependent children own 10 percent or more of a business, you are considered to be receiving “pass-through” income from the business’s clients. In other words, the business’s clients may be considered sources of income to you.
- **Gifts.** You have an economic interest in anyone, whether an individual or an organization, who has

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given you gifts which total \$390 or more within 12 months prior to the decision about which you are concerned.

- **Personal Financial Effect.** You have an economic interest in your personal expenses, income, assets, or liabilities, as well as those of your immediate family. This is known as the “personal financial effects” rule. If these expenses, income, assets or liabilities are likely to go up or down by \$250 or more in a 12-month period as a result of the governmental decision, then the decision has a “personal financial effect” on you.

On the Statement of Economic Interests (Form 700) you file each year, you disclose many of the economic interests that could cause a conflict of interest for you. However, be aware that not all of the economic interests that may cause a conflict of interest are listed on the Form 700. A good example is your home. It is common for a personal residence to be the economic interest that triggers a conflict of interest even though you are not required to disclose your home on the Form 700.



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## **Directly or Indirectly Involved?**

### **Step Four — Are your economic interests directly or indirectly involved in the governmental decision?**

An economic interest which is directly involved in — and therefore directly affected by — a governmental decision creates a bigger risk of a conflict of interest than does an economic interest which is only indirectly involved in the decision. As a result, the FPPC's conflict-of-interest regulations distinguish between economic interests that are directly involved and interests that are indirectly involved.

Once you have identified your economic interests, you must next decide if they are directly involved in the governmental decision about which you are concerned. The FPPC has established specific rules for determining whether each kind of economic interest is directly or indirectly involved in a governmental decision.

The details of these rules are beyond the scope of this guide. In general, however, an economic interest is directly involved if it is the subject of the governmental decision. For example, if the interest is real property, and the decision is about building a donut shop down the block from the property, then the interest is directly involved. If the interest is a business, and the decision is whether to grant a license for which the business has applied, the interest is directly involved.

These are just examples; you should contact your agency counsel, the FPPC and the specific regulations

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if you have questions as each case arises. Note also that the next step in the analysis — applying the right standard to determine whether an impact is material — depends in part on whether the interest is directly or indirectly involved. The regulations — Sections 18704 through 18704.5 — and other helpful information can be found on the FPPC’s web site, <http://www.fppc.ca.gov>.

## **Materiality (Importance)**

### **Step Five — What kinds of financial impacts on your economic interests are considered important enough to trigger a conflict of interest?**

At the heart of deciding whether you have a conflict of interest is a prediction: Is it sufficiently likely that the governmental decision will have a material financial effect on your economic interests? As used here, the word “material” is akin to the term “important.” You will have a conflict of interest only if it is reasonably foreseeable that the governmental decision will have an important impact on your economic interests.

The FPPC has adopted rules for deciding what kinds of financial effects are important enough to trigger a conflict of interest. These rules are called “materiality standards,” that is, they are the standards that should be used for judging what kinds of financial impacts resulting from governmental decisions are considered material or important.

There are too many of these rules to review in detail in this booklet. Again, you can seek advice for your

*“Public officials, whether elected or appointed, should perform their duties in an impartial manner, free from bias caused by their own financial interests or the financial interests of persons who have supported them.”*

*-- California Political Reform Act of 1974*

agency counsel or the FPPC. However, to understand the rules at a “big picture” level, remember these facts:

- If the economic interest is directly involved in the governmental decision, the standard or threshold for deeming a financial impact to be material is stricter (i.e. lower). This is because an economic interest that is directly involved in a governmental decision presents a bigger conflict-of-interest risk for the public official who holds the interest.
- On the other hand, if the economic interest is not directly involved, the materiality standard is more lenient because the indirectly involved interest presents a lesser danger of a conflict of interest.
- There are different sets of standards for the different types of economic interests. That is, there is one set of materiality standards for business entities, another set for real property interests, and so on.
- The rules vary by the size and situation of the economic interest. For example, a moment’s thought will tell you that a \$20,000 impact resulting from a governmental decision may be crucial to a small business, but may be a drop in the bucket for a big corporation. For example, the materiality standards

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distinguish between large and small businesses, between real property which is close or far from property which is the subject of the decision.

## **Does a Conflict of Interest Result?**

### **Step Six — Is it substantially likely that the governmental decision will result in one or more of the materiality standards being met for one or more of your economic interests?**

As already mentioned in the introduction, the heart of the matter is deciding whether it is sufficiently likely that the outcome of the decision will have an important impact on your economic interests.

What does “sufficiently likely” mean? Put another way, how “likely” is “likely enough?” The Political Reform Act uses the words “reasonably foreseeable.” The FPPC has interpreted these words to mean “substantially likely.” Generally speaking, the likelihood need not be a certainty, but it must be more than merely possible.

A concrete way to think about this is to ask yourself the following question: Is it substantially likely that one of the materiality standards I identified in step five will be met as a result of the government decision? Step six calls for a factual determination, not necessarily a legal one. Also, an agency may sometimes segment (break down into separate decisions) a decision to allow participation by an official if certain conditions are

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met. Therefore, you should always look at your economic interest and how it fits into the entire factual picture surrounding the decision.

## **“Public Generally” Exception**

### **Step Seven — If you have a conflict of interest, does the “public generally” exception apply?**

Now that you have determined that you will have a conflict of interest for a particular decision, you should see if the exceptions in Step 7 and Step 8 permit you to participate anyway. Not all conflicts of interest prevent you from lawfully taking part in the government decision at hand. Even if you otherwise have a conflict of interest, you are not disqualified from the decision if the “public generally” exception applies.

This exception exists because you are less likely to be biased by a financial impact when a significant part of the community has economic interests that are substantially likely to feel essentially the same impact from a governmental decision that your economic interests are likely to feel. If you can show that a significant segment of your jurisdiction has an economic interest that feels a financial impact which is substantially similar to the impact on your economic interest, then the exception applies.

The “public generally” exception must be considered with care. You may not just assume that it applies. There are specific rules for identifying the specific seg-

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ments of the general population with which you may compare your economic interest, and specific rules for deciding whether the financial impact is substantially similar. Again, contact your agency counsel, the FPPC and the specific rules for advice and details. The regulations outlining the steps to apply the “public generally” exception can be found on the FPPC website at <http://www.fppc.ca.gov> under regulations 18707-18707.9.

## **Are you required to participate?**

### **Step Eight — Even if you have a disqualifying conflict of interest, is your participation legally required?**

In certain rare circumstances, you may be called upon to take part in a decision despite the fact that you have a disqualifying conflict of interest. This “legally required participation” rule applies only in certain very specific circumstances in which your government agency would be paralyzed, unable to act. You are most strongly encouraged to seek advice from your agency legal counsel or the FPPC before you act under this rule.

## **Conclusion**

Generally speaking, here are the keys to meeting your obligations under the Political Reform Act’s conflict-of-interest laws:

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- Know the purpose of the law, which is to prevent biases, actual and apparent, which result from the financial interests of the decision-makers.
  - Learn to spot potential trouble early. Understand which of your economic interests could give rise to a conflict of interest.
  - Understand the “big picture” of the rules. For example, know why the rules distinguish between directly and indirectly involved interests, and why the public generally exception exists.
  - Realize the importance of the facts. Deciding whether you have a disqualifying conflict of interest depends just as much — if not more — on the facts of your particular situation as it does on the law.
  - Don’t try to memorize all of the specific conflict-of-interest rules. The rules are complex, and the penalties for violating them are significant. Learn to understand the “big picture.” You’ll then be able to look up or ask about the particular rules you need to apply to any given case.
  - Don’t be afraid to ask for advice. It is available from your agency’s legal counsel and from the FPPC.



## *How To Contact Us:*

*Mail:*

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*Website:*

[www.fppc.ca.gov](http://www.fppc.ca.gov)

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Toll-free advice line:

1-866-ASK-FPPC  
(1-866-275-3772)

Regular line: 1-916-322-5660

Enforcement hot-line:

1-800-561-1861

The seal of the State of California is a circular emblem. It features a central figure, Minerva, seated on a rock and holding a grizzly bear. She is wearing a helmet with a grizzly bear's head on top. The seal is surrounded by the words "EUREKA" at the top, "THE STATE OF CALIFORNIA" around the sides, and "1848" at the bottom. The seal is rendered in a light yellow color.

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