# CONFLICT OF INTEREST LAW: REAL PROPERTY

## 1. DISCUSSION

There are two sets of laws that address conflict of interest issues in general and may apply to board appointed advisory committee members and their ownership of property in particular. The Government Code addresses conflicts of interest generally in Section 1090 et seq. The Political Reform Act, which can be found in Government Code (Section 87100 et seq.) and the California Code of Regulations (Title 2, Section 18700 et seq.) also addresses conflicts of interest and specifically discusses the issue of property ownership. This memo focuses on the Political Reform Act since it addresses the issue of property ownership specifically and we do not think the Section 1090 would be triggered here.

### A. Political Reform Act

The Political Reform Act is found in the Government Code (Section 87100 et seq.) and the California Code of Regulations (Title II, Section 18700 et seq.). In general, the Act prohibits any public official from participating in a governmental decision that may affect his or her financial interest. Specifically, the Act lays out a six step analysis to determine if a conflict of interest exists in any given situation. Special instructions are given throughout this analysis when property ownership is at issue. Below, we discuss each step in the context of property ownership.

1. Elements

a. Public Official

As defined by Section 82048, public official includes any member of a state or local government agency, including members of advisory bodies.

b. Influencing a Government Decision

In order for a conflict of interest to exist, the public official must be attempting to use his or her official position to influence a governmental decision. According to Section 18702.1(a), this occurs when "the official votes on a matter, obligates his agency to a course of action, or enters into any contractual agreement on behalf of his or her agency." Any decision that relates to property will fall under this category.

c. Economic Interest

In order to be considered a conflict of interest, the official in question must have an economic interest that may be financially affected by the decision. (Section 87103(b).) In terms of property ownership, the public official in question will have an economic interest if he or she has some type of interest in a piece of property that is worth at least two thousand dollars. (Section 87103.)

d. Potential Effect on Economic Interest

Once it is established that the public official has a financial interest, it must be shown that the economic interest will be or possibly could be affected by the decision. According to Section 18704.2(a)(1), this step is satisfied if the member's property is within 500 feet of the boundary of the government's property.

e. Material Effect

The effect on the public official's property must be material. According to Regulation 18705.2(a), any "reasonably foreseeable" effect on the member's property is presumed to be material. If the public official can argue that the effect was not reasonably foreseeable, this presumption may be rebutted. The Regulation specifically states that a decision is not material if it does not foreseeable effect any of the following:

(1) the termination date of the lease,
(2) the amount of rent paid related to the property,
(3) the value of the right to sublease the property,
(4) the allowed use or actual use of the property, or
(5) the use or enjoyment of the property.

f. Reasonably Foreseeable Effect

At the time the government decision was made, the financial effect on the member's property must be reasonably foreseeable. This standard depends on the facts of the case. However, according to relevant decisions, an effect is always considered reasonably foreseeable if the government's decision will alter the use or value of the property in any manner.

2. <u>Consequences</u>

Once it is determined the public official fits all the elements and has a conflict of interest, he or she must follow the following steps as outlined in Section 87105.

a. Public Identification

First, the member must make the conflict of interest known to the public. The code requires the public identification to be "in detail sufficient to be understood by the public" but it specifically states that "disclosure of the exact street address of a residence is not required." (Section 87105.)

b. Recuse

The member must then recuse himself from discussing and voting on the manner.

c. Absence

The member must leave the room during the vote as well as during
any discussion of the matter and any disposition of the matter. The section allows the member to speak about the issue during the time that the general public is allowed to speak on the issue.

**B. Government Code Section 1090**

The Government Code Section 1090, et. seq. also deals with conflicts of interest. This section is boarder than the Political Reform Act but it does not specifically address the property ownership issue. It states that public officials cannot hold a financial interest in any contract made by them in their official capacity. As this advisory committee will not be contracting in their official capacity, we believe Section 1090 would not apply.

## 2. RELEVANT CASE LAW

Conflict of interest issues concerning real property owned by a public official was addressed by the California appellate court in Downey Cares v. Downey Community Development Commission (1987) 196 Cal.App.3d 983. In Downey Cares, the court considered whether the material financial effect on the value of a councilmember's real property and real estate business of amendment of a redevelopment plan was reasonably foreseeable. The councilmember owned real property in both the old and amended redevelopment project areas and his real estate business was located in the amended area. The trial court based its decision in part on the fact that while amendment of the plan did not spend money on specific projects, it began the process of setting aside revenues for improvements in the plan area. The trial court also found that it had a reasonably foreseeable effect on the councilmember's income as a realtor because such income is based on percentage of property value sold and it was reasonably foreseeable that the amendment to the plan area would increase property values. (Downey Cares, supra, at 989-90.)

The councilmember argued that the conflict laws did not bar his participation in the action to amend the plan because the amendment of the plan did not specify or authorize any particular projects so it could not have a reasonably foreseeable financial affect on any specific property, including the councilmember's. The councilmember conceded that he might be barred from future votes on implementation of the redevelopment plan, but argued that he was not barred from voting on the amendment of the plan. (Id. at 990.)

The Court of Appeal rejected the councilmember's argument as too narrow an interpretation of the PRA. (Ibid.) According to the Court:

> In determining the reasonably foreseeable effects of the adoption of . the redevelopment plan, the court may justifiably consider that the very purpose of redevelopment is to improve the property conditions in the redevelopment area. [Citation and footnote omitted.] The fact that it might be possible to conceive of specific redevelopment projects which might fail to affect [the

councilmember's] property and business does not show the trial court•s decision was wrong. The test is whether it was reasonably foreseeable that the adoption of the plan would have a material financial effect on [the councilmember's] property and business, and we find the trial court's decision supported by reasonable inferences and the record.

* * *

Footnote 4: Drawing reasonable inferences that redevelopment will foreseeably increase property values and realtor income, while taking care to decide each case on its individual circumstances, is a reasonable accommodation of conflicting considerations. Such interpretation does not paralyze redevelopment agencies from taking the first steps toward redevelopment. Government Code section 87101 provides: ••section 87100 does not prevent any public official from making or participating in the making of a governmental decision to the extent his participation is legally required for the action or decision to be made. The fact that an official's vote is needed to break a tie does not make his participation legally required for purposes of this section." This section represents a compromise which permits government agencies to act but minimizes conflicts of interest, reflecting a policy that the actions of a closely divided council or commission should not be determined by a member who 1s financially interested in the decision.

(Downey Cares, supra, at 991.)

## 3. CONCLUSION

If an advisory committee member owns a piece of property that may be financially affected by an act of the committee, the Political Reform Act may require that the committee takes steps to ensure its decisions are not influenced by the advisory committee member in question.