Report on a Case by the Board of Ethical Review

Case No. 66-7

Subject: Sponsorship Of Social Hour
Section 3-Code of Ethics-Section 11 -Code of Ethics.

Facts:
A state association of municipal officials conducts an annual meeting at which papers and discussions are pertinent to engineering problems and developments. A number of consulting engineers in the state attend the meeting. The program for the meeting shows that there will be a reception and social hour during the meeting, "sponsored by the Blank Engineering Company," a well-known consulting firm in the state.

Question:
Is it ethical for an engineering firm to sponsor a social hour at the meeting and be so identified in the program?

References:
Code of Ethics-Section 3-"The Engineer will not advertise his work or merit in a self-laudatory manner, and will avoid all conduct or practice likely to discredit or unfavorably reflect upon the dignity or honor of the profession."

Section 11-"The Engineer will not compete unfairly with another engineer by attempting to obtain employment or advancement or professional engagements by competitive bidding, by taking advantage of a salaried position, by criticizing other engineers, or by other improper or questionable methods."

Discussion:
The motivation for the sponsorship of the social hour by the engineering firm could be an expression of appreciation to the members of the association for past professional assignments, or it could be a means of advertising the firm and hoping that such a gesture of support might lead to future assignments. Or it might be both.

In any event, we believe that the motivation is not the controlling element of the case. The fact is that the firm has put itself into the position of such questions being raised in the minds of those who attend the social hour or those who see the program. Promotion of engineering engagements should be handled on a personal basis rather than by a broad-scale offering to one and all.

In addition, difficult though it may be to define "dignity" and "honor" as expressed in Section 3 of the Code, we believe that the sponsorship of a social hour under these circumstances may unfavorably reflect upon the profession. Likewise, Section 11 of the Code restricts competitive activities proscribing "other improper or questionable methods." At the least, the method employed here is "questionable."

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It may be proper for engineers to assist in a dignified manner the program requirement of an association whose members represent clients. If that be the desire and purpose, we suggest that an acceptable method would be for the social hour to be sponsored by an existing engineering society. Under that arrangement it would also be permissible for the program to list the names of all members of the sponsoring group. This would permit full recognition without singling out any one firm for special attention.

Conclusion:
It is unethical for an engineer to sponsor a social hour at a meeting of a state association of municipal officials if he is identified as the sponsor.

BOARD OF ETHICAL REVIEW CASE REPORTS: The Board of Ethical Review was established to provide service to the membership of the NSPE by rendering impartial opinions pertaining to the interpretation of the NSPE code of ethics.

BOARD OF ETHICAL REVIEW FOR THESE CASES: T. C. Cooke, P.E., C. C. Hallvik, P.E., James Hallett, P.E., N. O. Saulter, P.E., Sherman Smith, P.E., Kurt F. Wendt, P.E., Waldemar S. Nelson, P.E., Chairman.

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