

Ticket gift packs political wallop

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■ Similar contracts with the school district worth \$500,000.

■ A lease to operate a quarry on airport property.

Neither the city, school district nor airport has a policy that clearly applies to the game tickets.

Jim Howard, executive director of Illinois Common Cause, said public officials should decline such valuable gifts because questions can develop about whether the donor is buying influence.

The more expensive the gift, Howard said, the more questionable the arrangement.

"Public officials should be about doing the public's business — not using their position to get valuable gifts," he said. "Even though the intent may not be sinister, you have to be held to a higher standard."

Those who joined the mayor at the Bulls game described their seats as courteside, where tickets have a face value of \$450 each.

A Bulls spokesman said all home games were sold out before the season began in November. The United Center has a capacity of 24,000.

Box said Marzorati telephoned and offered tickets to the May 17 game because the two men are longtime friends.

Box is unsure whether the tickets belonged to the company or Marzorati personally, but he is confident that the gift had nothing to do with Rockford Blacktop's business with City Hall.

"I've known Gary for 10 or 15 years," he said. "I didn't ask a lot of questions."

In recent years, Rockford Blacktop has won dozens of city road contracts, some worth more than \$1 million each. But it recently lost a couple of city contracts to competitors.

"If there was any expectation of favoritism, they didn't get any," Box said.

Marzorati, contacted at William Charles headquarters on Forest Hills Road, referred questions about the Bulls tickets to spokesman Sue Grans.

Grans said she discussed the matter with Marzorati, and they agreed that the company should not divulge details of what they regard as Marzorati's personal affairs.

"I felt uncomfortable, personally, asking somebody what color underwear they have on," she said.

Marzorati also is one of the mayor's appointees to the MetroCentre Board of Directors, a volunteer position. Oates was appointed by Box to the airport board of commissioners, which pays \$160 a month.

The airport's dealings with William Charles have included not only the quarry lease, but a contract for a study completed last summer on development of airport property.

Oates dismissed any ethical questions stemming from the Bulls tickets. The night of the game, he said, the fact that the tickets came from Marzorati was not even mentioned.

"I was invited to the game by the mayor," he said. "If somebody asks you to a Bulls game, do you ask where the tickets came from?"

After Box encouraged him to invite others, Oates, a dentist, approached Epps and a fourth companion, Dr. Arthur Rone.

Epps also said he did not question the source of the tickets. Informed that they came from a Rockford Blacktop executive, the superintendent said he did not think the public school district had any business dealings with the company.

School district records show Rockford Blacktop has won \$500,000 in contracts since 1996.

Epps said he sees no ethical problems and would not do things differently if the situation arose again: "If they invited me, I would assume they hadn't stolen the tickets — that they owned them

Voices

Pedestrians in downtown Rockford were asked whether the mayor and other public officials should accept free Bulls playoffs tickets:



"I suppose people are free to give gifts. Friends give friendly gifts. We'd have to take their word on it until it's

proven otherwise."

Dennis Heaney, clergy, Somonauk

"It would depend on the businessman's motivation. I don't know his motivation. He should be careful. It could put them all in a

bad light."

Gretchen Threet, library worker, Rockford



"I don't have a problem with it. Rockford Blacktop has allowed Rockford to grow. I just say, let them have a good time."

Will McAuliffe, theater promoter, Rockford

properly — and I would jump at the chance."

Rone, who has never held public office, said he has been a season-ticket holder at Bulls games for 15 years. He said he took Box to a game a few years ago.

He passed over his regular seats May 17 to accompany Box and the others in the seats from Marzorati. Rone heard no discussion about the source of the tickets.

"I wasn't asking any questions," he said. "I was a guest."

Other civic and business leaders have varied opinions on whether the mayor and his group should have accepted the tickets.

City policies prohibit gifts from vendors or contractors, but Personnel Director Einar Forsman said the prohibition applies to staff employees — not elected officials.

School district policies say outsiders "are discouraged from routinely presenting gifts" to school employees.

The airport follows the state's ethics law, which prohibits lawmakers from accepting noncampaign gifts worth more than \$100 when political motive "could reasonably be inferred." The law applies specifically to legislators in Springfield and offers no mechanism for applying its restrictions to local officials.

Jeanette Brooks, past president of the Northern Illinois Minority Contractors, said she sees no ethical issue in the Rockford Blacktop executive treating the mayor and others to a Bulls game.

"I don't have a problem with it," she said. "I wish he would've given it to me."

But Curt Worden, another airport board member, questioned whether Box should have accepted such a gift from a city contractor.

Worden said Oates' conduct as an airport commissioner is not questionable because Oates got his ticket from Box. The mayor's actions leave "a real question mark," he said, because of Rockford Blacktop's business dealings at City Hall.

"If it's a vendor of the airport who called me, I wouldn't do it," he said. "The question, it seems to me, relates to the mayor and Rockford Blacktop."

■ Ethics policies, 5A

■ Would others do it? 5A