

# Officials must recollect they serve public



**O**akland County prosecutor Richard Thompson had the right idea when he issued the edict that no prosecutors could hold outside jobs.

By doing so, he effectively eliminated any chance his prosecutors might create conflicts of interest by running their own private practices. He also made sure that he was getting a full commitment — and a full day's work — from his employees.

And he gets that.

If you caught assistant prosecutor Michael Stern's closing arguments in the murder trials of Joseph and Michelle Bazzetta this week, you could tell this was a man committed to his work.

I imagine Stern had a tough time summoning up enough energy just to drive home on those days. His outside interests, no doubt, are confined to his family.

I remember talking to Stern during an earlier murder trial, in which he successfully prosecuted 15-year-old Jonathan Martin for the cold-blooded killing of a Waterford Township man.

While we were waiting for the jury to come back with a verdict, Stern, who is a notorious worrier, was talking about how, in weeks of preparation for the case, he would awaken at night and make notes to himself about key points.

He would write on anything handy, and at one time considered scribbling on his socks.

This is a man who cares about his job.

That's not always the case. I suppose some county jobs don't carry with them the same drama, the same consequences, if you will, that a prosecutor's job does. But the money for all county salaries comes from the same pockets, those of county taxpayers.

The Oakland Press found, not long ago, that some county employees were letting their outside business interests interfere with their official duties. As a result, their administrators conducted an in-house investigation, and disciplined six. Two were fired.

While we were working on the stories, we interviewed a state official, who said Oakland County was known to be lax about keeping track of outside employment.

Some of the things tolerated in Oakland County would not be tolerated at the state level, he said, because there were clear-cut rules that applied, *written rules*, he said.

For instance, state sanitation inspectors are prohibited from dealing in land speculation, because it creates at least an appearance of conflict of interest.

In Oakland County there are some rules, but they vary from department to department and are subject to merit system rules.

Perhaps the rules don't go far enough. The health division, for example, has a disclosure rule that requires that all employees tell their supervisors of interest in land or other holdings that may appear to conflict with their jobs.

That rule was apparently routinely ignored. But even if it had been followed, county inspectors, under existing rules, would have been allowed to continue to purchase hundreds of acres of property and develop it, thereby making some hefty profit.

There is a problem, even with that, at least in my mind. As sanitation inspectors, they are exposed to a tremendous amount of inside information about real estate in Oakland County. They deal with real estate agents, developers, townships, speculators and people who have land for sale, or are in the market for some.

In short, the inspectors' county positions give them an edge over other citizens and provide them with great opportunities to make extra money, on the side.

Is that wrong? I think so. There is the potential, and certainly the appearance of a conflict. And it opens up the way for wrongdoing, as we found when the inspectors routinely inspected each other's property for development.

A county official I admire at the court house has a sign on his wall, a quote from Thomas Jefferson, that reads, "When a man assumes a public trust, he should consider himself as public property."

I think so too.

(Lori Brasier covers Oakland County government for The Oakland Press.)