

# Value of exec's ethics code may rest in its enforcement

BY PAT MURPHY  
STAFF WRITER

The code of ethics unveiled by Oakland County Executive L. Brooks Patterson appears to be getting a generally warm reception, although some question whether it will have an impact, or how it will be enforced.

The executive Monday released a five-page code of ethics covering a wide range of activities including conflict of interest, accepting or soliciting gifts, political activity and setting forth general standards of conduct.

It was compiled by the executive's Ethics Commission, an 11-member advisory board chaired by Oakland Circuit Judge Hilda Gage and Birmingham attorney James M. Alexander who is also chairman of the Oakland County Republican Party.

"We're sending a message," Patterson said at a press conference. "We want the world — as well as those affected — to know that public officials have a higher standard of ethics to live by."

## Sets a tone

Patterson said there were no particular problems — or conflicts — that prompted him to commit to a code of ethics last November shortly after defeating Democratic challenger Elizabeth "Betty" Howe.

"But I think it sets an ethical tone for all to follow," he said.

While the code "indirectly" affects some 2,400 county employees within the executive branch of government, Patterson said it has direct application only to his 18

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*Commissioner Lawrence R. Pernick  
Southfield Democrat*

political appointees — who serve at his pleasure.

Other employees, including the 2,400 within the executive branch, are also covered by the Oakland County merit system, Patterson said. That system includes rules of conduct and sanctions for any violations.

The penalty for violating his code of ethics, the executive said, will vary from simple disciplinary action to full discharge, depending on the seriousness of the transgression.

"I am the judge and jury on those matters," Patterson said. "And at times I'll be the executioner."

Lack of a formal system for reporting and processing alleged violations of Patterson's ethics code is looked upon as a serious flaw, according to Karen Merrill, director of Common Cause of Michigan, a government watchdog organization.

Merrill said she likes the idea of the executive drafting and promulgating standards of conduct. But its effect might be weakened, she said, by the lack of rules covering how complaints would be processed and violators punished.

Another person who applauded the concern for ethical standards

is county commissioner Lawrence R. Pernick, D-Southfield.

## What about enforcement

"I haven't seen the code," Pernick said. "So I don't know what's in it. I do, however, think it's a good idea."

"I believe it might be more effective, however, if there were provisions for enforcement. Mr. Patterson was county prosecutor long enough to realize that without enforcement provisions, most laws are ineffective."

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Another commissioner, Marilyn E. Gosling, R-Bloomfield Hills, applauded Patterson's new ethics code. "An ethics code is like the Ten Commandments. It's there, and you always know what to do."


Gosling, who helped the county board draft and adopt a code of ethics in 1989, noted that every office in county government seems to have its own standards. "The courts have their code and the sheriff has his," she said. "It seems like every department has one."

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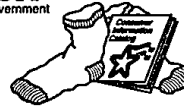
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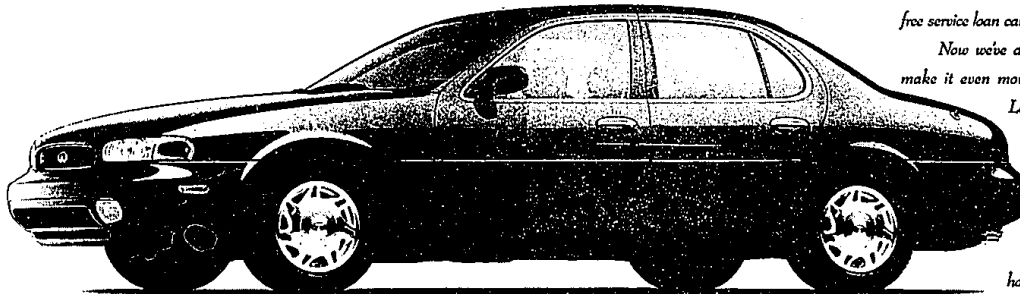
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