



TEXAS ETHICS COMMISSION



ETHICS ADVISORY OPINION NO. 423

December 10, 1999

Whether a legislator may use political contributions to pay the costs associated with membership in a nonprofit organization that helps its members develop leadership skills. (AOR-466)

The Texas Ethics Commission has been asked whether a member of the legislature may use political contributions to pay to become a member of a nonprofit organization that helps its members develop leadership skills.

Title 15 of the Texas Election Code prohibits the conversion of political contributions to the personal use of a candidate or officeholder. Elec. Code § 253.035(a). “Personal use” is defined for purposes of this provision as “a use that primarily furthers individual or family purposes not connected with the performance of duties or activities as a candidate for or holder of a public office.” *Id.* § 253.035(d). Thus, it is permissible for a legislator to use political contributions to pay for membership in a private organization if the benefits of membership are primarily connected with duties and activities of the legislator’s office.

The requestor has provided information describing the organization in question. The stated purpose of the organization is to help members learn “the skills of facilitation, conflict management, collaboration, coalition building, and consensus.” Certainly such skills are an asset to anyone participating in the legislative process. Therefore, if a legislator’s primary purpose in joining such an organization is to acquire leadership skills to facilitate legislative work, the legislator may use political contributions to pay the costs of joining the organization. *See generally Ethics Advisory Opinion Nos. 247 (1995), 157 (1993)* (officeholders may use political contributions to pay for educational courses if courses are primarily intended to help officeholders with official duties or activities).

SUMMARY

A legislator may use political contributions to pay the costs of membership in an organization that helps its members acquire leadership skills if the legislator’s primary purpose in joining the organization is to facilitate legislative work.