

look funny. People have to wonder if his advocacy (of the revisions) made the difference."

Critics allege this is not the first time Bennett's role as a property developer has put him in a situation that blurs the line between public interest and private gain.

Although many city officials are quick to defend Bennett as a man dedicated to the city's future, the issue raises difficult and important questions about the nature of public office.

In a recent interview, Bennett

refused to comment on the issue of conflict of interest. But he did say he, with other city officials, relies "almost religiously" on the opinion of the city attorney in making decisions about his involvement in issues where a conflict of interest is possible.

The controversial tenant protection revisions, which would have removed the requirement that developers find comparable housing for elderly, handicapped and low-income residents before converting or offer them a lifetime lease, were turned down by the City Council in

February.

But questions raised by the constituents of Hill and state Sen. Grattan Kerans, D-Eugene, remain about Bennett's role in drafting the revisions and his own intentions about converting his property in the future.

Kerans, after hearing numerous complaints from constituents about Bennett's possible personal interest in the condominium law revisions, drafted the conflict of interest bill.

Presently, public officials make their own decisions about

declaring a conflict of interest. The bill would take the decision away from them and make it an automatic conflict of interest when a public official has a stake in an issue because of his or her role as a business owner.

After a declaration of conflict of interest, it would be up to local officials to decide whether the person could vote or not, Kerans said.

"The law put (Bennett) in an untenable position," Kerans said. "It's too much of a burden on a public official to make him the sole judge of whether a con-

flict exists."

State law defines conflict of interest as any action, decision or recommendation that would monetarily benefit the public official or a member of his or her household. In addition, a code of ethics prohibits a public official from using the office for personal financial gain.

Ben Taitel, a spokesman for the citizens' coalition against the condominium ordinance revisions, said he believes Bennett did have a conflict of interest and applauds his decision to abstain from voting.

"Any individual who has a financial stake in a building would seem to me to have a conflict of interest," Taitel said. While he does not believe Bennett would have converted The Eugene Manor into condominiums, Taitel thinks he might have sold the building to another developer who could have converted it to condos.

Hill said he has received numerous complaints from constituents about Bennett's activities during the last several years, including his role as a proponent of the condominium conversion revisions.

While Hill does not believe any state law has been violated, he said some parts of Bennett's involvement with the condominium issue "make the whole thing look fishy."

Bennett's position as one of the strongest supporters of the plan appeared motivated by self-interest, Hill added. "Although you may abstain from a vote, that doesn't mean you don't have influence on the decision-making."

But others say it is already too difficult to get qualified people to serve the community as unpaid city councilors, and those who do should not have their hands slapped because they own businesses.

"We have such a hard time getting people to serve," said City Councilor Emily Schue. "The councilors are unpaid, and they still dedicate a lot of time to the job. Should they have to pay for that?"

But the condominium conversion issue was not the first to link Bennett to possible conflict of interest.

In 1982, Bennett was selected to redevelop the historic Ax Bily Building, which eventually became the \$3.6 million Downtown Athletic Club, a posh facility designed to serve the athletic and social needs of the downtown business population.

Bennett received about \$2 million in loans from the city and from federal block grant funds, including a \$300,000 business development loan, the largest such loan ever given to a Eugene developer.

Bennett also was a member of the Eugene Planning Commission at the time of the loan and served as the commission's representative on the Community Development Committee, an 11-member group that advises the City Council about how to allocate federal block grant funds the city receives each year.

The city of Eugene, which owned the structure, sold the building to Bennett for \$213,000, then, as other financing methods fell through, the city stepped in to help finance the project, said Jesse Smith, the city's development finance officer.

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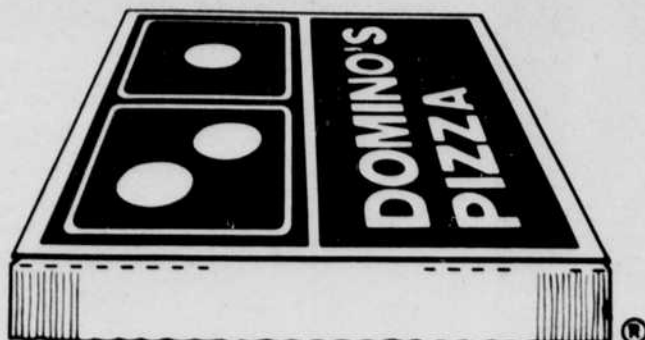
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