

New policy cautions staff about use of online forums

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Board adopts guidelines regulating village employees' participation in social media

The Village of Grafton has adopted a policy that cautions employees about their participation in online forums.

The policy, which was unanimously approved last week by the Village Board, provides guidelines for municipal employees who use blogs, podcasts, photo and video sharing, chat lines and other social media.

"Unless authorized by their supervisor (or village administrator), employees are not authorized to speak on behalf of the village," the policy states.

The policy also cautions employees about "prohibited activities," including "engaging in vulgar or abusive language, personal attacks of any kind or offensive terms targeting individuals of groups."

In addition, employees are prohibited from endorsing commercial products, services, political parties, candidates or groups.

Village Administrator Darrell Hofland said the policy was not enacted in response to employee misconduct but to establish guidelines that will help prevent problems.

"The good news is that this is proactive. We've been fortunate we haven't have employees who have violated these guidelines," Hofland told the board before it approved the policy.

Trustee Jim Grant questioned if the policy would raise constitutional concerns by prohibiting employees' freedom of speech. However, Hofland said employees remain free to express personal opinions in online forums as long as they don't do so as village representatives.

The policy advises employees who discuss the village or village-related matters online to "coordinate your writing" with the village administrator.

Hofland said the policy is similar to those used by businesses, schools and organizations and was reviewed by the village's labor attorney before being presented to the Village Board. The attorney "made some changes to increase the broadness of the policy," he added.

The policy does not apply to elected officials, Hofland noted.