Insurance Commissioner Sherman Bernard, the first statewide elected official to be found guilty of ethics charges, said on Friday he's not worried about being declared in violation of "stupid, childish laws."

Earlier this week the Board of Ethics for Elected Officials said Bernard broke the ethics code when he allowed the Louisiana Automobile Dealers Association to pay his way to three of the group's conventions.


State ethics laws prohibit public officials from receiving donations from private sources to perform their official duties. The law is designed to prevent conflicts between an official's public duties and his private interests.

Bernard said the ethics board is playing with semantics. "I could have been perfectly legal. . . . All I've got to do is tell them I'm not going in my official capacity as insurance commissioner and the trips would have been okay," Bernard said.

"I don't believe I took anything of economic value," Bernard said. "They asked me to go and speak at their convention. They didn't pay me for going. They just paid my expenses."

For years the board has been wrestling with interpretations of a provision of the ethics code that prohibits government employees and officials from receiving "a thing of economic value" from anyone they regulate.

The law allows some exceptions for social occasions, but the board ruling apparently indicates it is taking a stronger line on officials who take gratuities from interest groups that have dealings with government.

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If I regulated the automobile dealers' association, then I think I would have a conflict of interest. But I don't regulate them.

The ethics board, in handing down its ruling, agreed not to levy a fine against Bernard in return for a promise that he not take such trips in the future.

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