

Former Council of Labor Affairs minister Jennifer Wang (王如玄) has become the latest politician to discover, much to their chagrin, that running for higher office brings with it a greater scrutiny of their professional and personal life.

While she and the Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT) might have expected her to face criticism after KMT Chairman Eric Chu (吳敦義) chose her as his running mate for the Jan. 16 presidential election, they probably were not expecting the firestorm that has erupted over her living arrangements and real-estate dealings.

That they did not expect it reflects poorly on Chu, Wang, the KMT and society at large.

Wang, a lawyer by training and vocation, insists that she has done nothing illegal and that most of the real-estate purchases made by her or family members took place when she was a private citizen.

Her complaint that criticism over the subsidized apartment in Taipei's Daan District (大安) where she and her husband live — including questions about their eligibility and the rent they pay — does not take into account the additional monthly fees that they pay or the money they spent to renovate it shows a disconnect from reality. Given the couple's combined salaries and assets, they could have easily afforded to rent or buy an apartment if they needed to be closer to work.

However, the bigger issue is that Wang's problems highlight systemic faults in three key areas: outdated rules governing subsidized housing for government employees, the exploitation of apartments constructed under the Act for Rebuilding Old Quarters for Military Dependents (舊軍眷宿舍重建條例) and the limited nature of the nation's "sunshine laws."

It is these faults that need to be addressed, by new legislation if necessary, to close the loopholes that have allowed the system to be abused.

If the reports on the amount of rent Wang's husband is paying for a "dormitory" apartment are

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correct, there should be a linking of position, salary and rent, so that someone at his level is not paying just NT\$700 or NT\$2,000 a month.

The government spends a lot of money to convert old military housing areas for service personnel, veterans and their dependents into modern apartments that are allocated or sold to military personnel or their dependents at below market value.

Wang has said that her sister, mother and husband each own a “military housing” unit, all legally obtained.

While the law bans the original owners from selling such units within five years of registering the property, too many of these “military” units are ending up in the private sector because of legal loopholes.

This should not be allowed to continue. There are several possible options, not mutually exclusive, that would ensure that such units continue to serve the spirit in which they were built — by extending the length of time before the original buyer can resell the unit; by requiring that future purchasers also be military, veteran or dependent; and by requiring a certain percentage of the profit made from the first resale to be returned to the government for other public housing projects.

One must also ask why the questions Wang is facing now were not raised when she was minister.

Perhaps the saddest thing about the whole imbroglio was Wang’s statement on Thursday: “Now I know the public’s perception is equally important and I am willing to hold myself to the highest moral standards.”

That a graduate of the nation’s top girls’ high school and top university — from which she received both a bachelor’s and master’s degree in law — and a former executive director of the Taipei Bar Association should only now say that she recognizes that the appearance of propriety matters as much legal requirements is a sad indictment of Taiwan’s political and civic

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systems.

Upholding the spirit of the law should be as important as following the letter of the law.

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