

Campaign donations to state politicians laced with conflicts

You're a wealthy business owner. You give big bucks to politicians and political parties. In return, you get favorable treatment from state government. That's the way many folks think the political-business complex operates these days.

That's why some Michigan Senate Democrats stirred up such a hornets' nest last week when they released research contending that big GOP contributors are getting big bucks back from the state.

They released a list of 53 people who contributed \$50,000 or more to the Republican Party from 1994-97. Of these, 36 are affiliated with companies that received state contracts worth a total of \$758,613,307 and various grants including job training amounting to \$41,900,032, according to the Democrats.

"The massive donations by these individuals whose companies do business with the state clearly create the potential for a conflict of interest," said Sen. Gary Peters, D-Bloomfield Township. "When you find this correlation between big contributors and the amount of the contracts, it just leaves open the door for charges of conflict of interest and abuse of the system."

Peters also introduced legislation modeled on laws prohibiting investors in casinos in Detroit from contributing to political parties or candidates. The package also would:

■ Cap donations by individuals to state parties at \$5,000 annually.

■ Cap total contributions by an individual to all political campaigns at \$50,000 or \$100,000 per election cycle.

■ Response from Republicans was furious.

"This is sleazy research that should never have seen the light of day," charged Jim Tobin, spokesman for the Michigan Jobs Commission, which awards most of the job training grants to companies.

John Truscott, spokesman for Gov. John Engler, asserted the state runs the cleanest contracting process in history. "The governor's office doesn't know who's getting the contracts," Truscott argued. "Contracts are competitively bid and, besides, most of the bureaucrats making those decisions are Democrats."

During the administration of Gov. James Blanchard back in the 1980s, I served as chair of the Michigan Job Training Coordinating Council. The council worked closely with the governor's office for job training. Together, we



PHILIP POWER

did much the same things the Michigan Jobs Commission does today, so I know something about what reality lies behind the partisan sound and fury.

First, there is no doubt the potential for abuse exists, whether in Republican or in Democratic administrations. Big contributors are always going to get access to the system; they certainly aren't making these big contributions for nothing.

John Truscott is being disingenuous when he claims nobody in the governor's office knows who's applying for state contracts and grants. The Engler administration is one of the most efficiently managed political operations in Michigan history, and if you believe nobody in the administration knows who has contributed to the Republican Party, I've got a very nice bridge I can sell you.

It's never cut and dried in these matters.

As I remember it, we gave some big job training grants to the Chrysler Corp. Why not? The company was among Michigan's largest employers, fully entitled to legal job training help. And some Chrysler executives made big contributions to Gov. Blanchard's campaigns. Why not? He helped save the company.

Peters' legislation makes lots of sense, although I doubt it will go anywhere in the GOP-controlled Senate. Short of that, one useful step might be to require full disclosure of just who gets what state grants and contracts from the state and what their record of political giving might be. This, at least, might reduce the appearance of conflict of interest.

Phil Power is chairman of HomeTown Communications Network Inc., the company that owns this newspaper. He welcomes your comments, either by voice mail at (734) 953-2047, Ext. 1880, or by e-mail at ppower@coonline.com

LETTER

School choice is really chance

The Farmington Public School District often touts its "School of Choice" program as one of its assets. Administrators wax poetically at civic luncheons about giving parents the freedom to choose the school that best fits their child. The truth of the matter is a much uglier picture. For many parents, Farmington's "Schools of Choice" program is, in reality, schools of chance.

I think most parents are under the false assumption that schools of choice means that a parent may opt to send his/her child to school, outside the neighborhood, because it has special courses, special times of attendance, or because it has something else that best fits the child - if there is room. I don't think anyone ever thinks of a school of choice option as being the only way your child can attend his neighborhood school.

This is what is happening to my family. We bought a house in Farmington because the district has a good reputation and in our neighborhood because we saw that the neighborhood schools are close and good. Then several years later, new boundary lines for the schools were designated. They chose to redistrict small neighborhoods because small neighborhoods make less noise about change than big neighborhoods. However, the district has "school of choice" so you are not too concerned about the fact that the children in your small neighborhood are now supposed to go to different middle school than the rest of the kids at that school.

Your child attends elementary school for six years. She makes friends. She develops a social support system that is just as important to her as your friends are to you. You work on committees with other families and develop the kind of community relationships the district and Farmington Families in Action is always talking about. You work hard to get to know both your children's friends and their parents so that when the kids head off into those dangerous middle school years, you are confident that your group is on the right path and the parents can communicate with one another.

You watch as each fifth grade class approaches spring and choices are made about middle school. Occasionally, a child in the neighborhood chooses to go to the atypical school. Or one year, the entire neighborhood of kids decided to go off the "other school." Yet, each year the "school of choice" program worked so that students got to attend the school they chose. Now it is your child's turn. Oops, for the first time there is an unusually large group of children who wish to attend Dunckel Middle School. Children who have already attended another school of choice, Highmeadow, and children who went to

parochial school, whose tuition has gone up, are also asking to attend this school - along with the several children in your small neighborhood. So all the names are thrown into one hat and a lottery is held. Your child is suddenly told that there will be no "school of choice" this year. It will be school by chance. Never mind that the kids from Highmeadow and other schools don't know the children at the neighborhood school and your child has spent six to eight years with them on a daily basis.

The lottery is held. There are winners and losers. Your child did not get a winning number. Now you have to tell your daughter that she cannot continue on with all her friends into Dunckel Middle School. She has to start over at East Middle School and make new friends. Oh, and by the way, your two good friends who also live in our neighborhood and were in the lottery - well, they got into Dunckel. So now my daughter faces the prospect of entering middle school (a scary transition for all children) without any support system outside her family. Now, all her friends, including those who live in our neighborhood, will be going to the neighborhood school, Dunckel ... while she must get on a bus and go the other side of town to attend East with total strangers. She is the only child in the neighborhood being forced to go to a school she has not chosen.

You tell yourself that life is full of disappointments and that your child must get used to the cruelty of the world. You assure your daughter that she can still keep her old friends, even though you can already see the process of separation beginning in the classroom. The "winners" are bonding and bonding together. This will be most evident on the day they all leave the classroom to go visit Dunckel and my child is left behind. Did you know that 11-year-old children experience loss just like adults ... anger, tears, depression ... maybe more so, because they have just entered the period where peers become more important than anything.

It is no consolation to her that in three years, she will be able to return to those friends. Yes, these new friendships are only temporary. The district expects her to keep these new friends for only three years. Then she is distracted to return to the neighborhood high school (North) and she will be expected to try to rejoin one of those teenage cliques (we all know how easy that is). Of course, Farmington Public Schools will assure her she could always start with her new friends and attend one of the other high schools (Harrison or Farmington), if there is room. After all, we have "school of choice" ...

Patricia Newcombe
Farmington Hills



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