The Shame of our Taxing Districts: Public Corruption

by KCRR President, Jeff Ward

Last Thursday the fundraising arm of the National Education Association, the nation's largest and most powerful teacher union urged members to again support Barrack Obama's reelection in 2012. At the same time Jeffrey Immelt, CEO of one of the largest government contractors, General Electric, is one of the Presidents most active supporters. Both the NEA and General Electric share with Obama a common selfish interest, the unprecedented expansion of the size and scope of government. In turn these special interests will corruptly pour millions of dollars, which originally flow from our pockets through government coffers, into the President's and like-minded politician's bids for election.

This gravy train of public corruption is not just a phenomenon of Washington DC but is happening right here in Kootenai County in our May 17 Taxing District Elections. Public employee unions and other government contractors are using both direct and indirect proceeds of our tax dollars to promote candidates who, if elected, will in turn give them favorable contracts. This is the very definition of public corruption.

The first and most obvious manifestation of this is the use of public resources directly for campaign purposes. One instance was recently uncovered when teacher union-supported CDA School Board candidate Stephanie Powers was scheduled to speak promoting her candidacy on school property at PTA meeting, which was promoted using the school's tax-funded newsletter. Her opponent Tom Hamilton was not invited nor mentioned in the newsletter. This behavior is even worse in the Post Falls District where the teacher union-supported candidates Dave Paul and Michelle Lippert claim they received endorsements of parent teacher organizations using public school facilities and resources. Later it was learned that those claims were lies. Unfortunately those lies about illegal endorsements could endanger PTO's tax-exempt status and put all those dollars raised by kids in bake and chocolate sales at risk. For shame.

The most insidious aspect is the behavior of the teachers unions themselves. Besides the chronic use of school facilities, phones, emails, parent lists and organizations and even the kids themselves to promote their candidates, the teacher unions have most likely broken state bribery laws by offering to give money to Trustee candidates. On April 11, 2011 the Coeur d'Alene Education Association sent letters that specifically offered candidates for Coeur d'Alene School District Trustees "critical organizational and financial support." This was contingent upon receiving the organization's "recommendation" after requiring candidates to convey their opinions on various issues dealing with the organization's contract with the district. Since the CDAEA contracts with the district, offering money and resources to Trustees and potential Trustees is, in Idaho state law, a bribe. For a government contractor to bank roll the election of those with whom they are required to negotiate is obviously unethical but in this case it is also most likely illegal. A letter has been sent to Kootenai County law enforcement agencies asking for an immediate investigation.

Such shenanigans have resulted in Trustees who have approved Coeur d'Alene union contracts in which taxpayers pay for cell phones and scores for comp days for union bosses and a contract for the union-supported Superintendent that includes perks like taxpayer paid gym memberships, 25 vacations days a year, and a $1000-a-month unaudited personal "slush" fund on top of her six figure salary. That audacious contract would put Wall Street CEOs to shame.

Even in highway districts certain candidates come with special interest agendas. Lakes Highway Commissioners Monty Montgomery and Marv Lekstrum, who have made their district a model of efficient and conservative management, are now being challenged by two groups of special interest candidates. On one side you have an attempted corporate takeover of a public highway district by a materials contractor (two challengers are listed on various websites as executives of Oldcastle, an Irish multinational corporation and supplier of asphalt and concrete) and on the other side, an attempted takeover by former disgruntled employees opposed to cost-saving reforms. If Marv and Monty are defeated who will represent the taxpayers?

The voters of Kootenai County should not allow these improprieties to sway their votes on Election Day, May 17. Each of us should find out which candidates are beholden to organized special interests and which candidates will be independent voices for the taxpayers. Please vote to stamp out even the appearance of shameful public corruption.