

WISCONSIN STATE
LEGISLATURE
COMMITTEE HEARING
RECORDS

2003-04

(session year)

Senate

(Assembly, Senate or Joint)

**Committee on
Education, Ethics
and Elections
(SC-EEE)**

(Form Updated: 11/20/2008)

COMMITTEE NOTICES ...

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MONEYED POLITICAL SYSTEM PERPETUATES BUDGET, TAX CRISIS

By: Jack E. Lohman

Sen. Mike Ellis is absolutely correct: For years, special interests have bought and paid for our governor and state legislature, the results of which are the third highest taxed state in the union with a projected \$2 billion budget deficit in 2003. Much worse than last year, with no more tobacco funds to tap.

Can we ever stop the political trading that is at its source? Yes, but only if we commit to 100% campaign finance reform as they have in Maine and Arizona.

On election reform, Sen. Ellis has a superb idea for a separate Ethics and Elections Board reporting to the state Supreme Court, instead of the Legislature. Let's hope his leadership on this proposal is contagious in Madison. But on the proposed 45% public funding in Senate Bill 104, Ellis should raise the bar to the same level -- total separation between private money and public leaders. The only way to effectively ensure responsible government spending is to eliminate our moneyed political system. Not reduce it, eliminate it. Totally!

The public doesn't want a partially clean system. With over 70% support, voters want a totally clean system and are willing to pay the \$5 per year needed to fund it. But we want to fund it all, not just the 45% that subsidizes the special interest's 55% and leaves them still in control. If we're involved we want them uninvolved. Taxpayers simply don't want to fund a 45% discount on the influence that the fat cats will use against us in the Legislature.

SB104 should be modified to include a 100% option, and then the candidates and voters can make the final decision. The \$1 billion the state doles out each year to campaign contributors -- \$240 per taxpayer -- would easily survive a weak 45% grant. The only way to eliminate this \$1 billion giveaway, reduce taxes and balance the budget is to get private money 100% out of the political system. Nothing less. If there is any reason to reduce political corruption by 45%, there is every reason to eliminate 100% of it.

Importantly, the Clean Money systems in Maine and Arizona have both survived constitutional challenges in both state and federal jurisdictions because they are voluntary. Just as 45% is constitutional, so is 100%. The only difference is the level of commitment. Candidates have a right to refuse private money, whether under a 45% grant or by declaring himself or herself a 100% Clean Money candidate. Let them make that choice.

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In the Clean Money system, any candidate can opt in or out, and special interests are free to give cash to those who reject the public grant. That's as it should be. These two states offer the same matching funds that Ellis proposes to offset issue ad expenditures, and that has reduced the incentive for business and labor groups to outspend each other.

In Maine and Arizona the 100% Clean Money system is working beautifully. Two thirds of their candidates ran clean and most won their seats. Arizona's governor even ran clean and beat her privately financed challenger. Campaign fundraisers have virtually dried up and legislators are ecstatic over their newfound time with their constituents and families. What could be better?

We keep asking: When will Wisconsin's leaders realize that our moneyed political system got them into their current mess, and they won't get out of it unless and until they eliminate all forms of private cash changing hands?

Compare our neighbor, Minnesota, which already has a partial public funding system that has failed miserably. While it has made running for office easier, it has not reduced special interest influence; perhaps has even increased it. Minnesota's budget deficit is twice ours, and Common Cause-MN and other reform groups are now fighting for a 100% Clean Money system.

Wisconsinites deserve nothing less, and Sen. Ellis should take the bold step. Add a 100% option and give our representatives a chance to clean the system once and for all. There will be no better time than now to get it passed. Then let's move on to other meaningful state issues.

As a life-long Republican I'd like to see the system fixed under the GOP's watch. And it is ***because I am a conservative that I want legislators beholden to the taxpayers instead of special interests. I'm already paying for the political system through the back door -- in hidden taxes -- but I'd rather pay for it up front, at a fraction of the cost and in a way that levels the playing field for challengers. Republicans now control both state houses; let's see if they have what it takes to break the link between those who write the checks and those who write the laws.***

Lohman is a Milwaukee business owner and is on the National Advisory Board of Public Campaign. He also publishes www.SmokeFreeDining.us and www.wi-cfr.org.

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