

THE JEFFERSON JOURNAL

...a commentary from

THE THOMAS JEFFERSON INSTITUTE FOR PUBLIC POLICY

Prince William's Discretionary Funds Should End Immediately

By Michael W. Thompson

“Open government” and “transparent government” are the current code words for “good government.”

Prince William County's Board of Supervisors, however, seem to lack a basic understanding that in today's world taxpayers' money should be budgeted and not available as a “slush fund” to be used as the Supervisors want. This county's Supervisors are allowed to spend unallocated office funds in a manner that skirts the normal budgeting process.

Thomas Jefferson said in a letter to Joseph Cabell on February 2, 1816, “...man...feels that he is a participator in the government of affairs not merely at an election, one day in the year, but every day

Indeed, more and more voters are interested on a regular basis in their government. That is true whether the voter is a Tea Party member or an “Occupy” member. They all want to participate in government more than once a year.

It is sad but true that government is tainted. People simply believe that politicians are “on the take” and that elected officials set up systems that take advantage of their government positions.

Indeed, look at what we have found out recently about our Congress: it was perfectly OK for our Congressmen and Senators to take actions that in any business would be illegal -- that is, take insider information and use it to buy stocks in companies that were going to be benefitted by government action that was being voted on by these very members of Congress. It was part of “the deal” for being a Member of Congress. And none of us – liberal or conservative, Republican or Democrat – knew this was going on. Not one member of Congress complained. Not one member brought it to the public's attention until a convicted felon who had gone to prison, Jack Abramoff, brought it up in his recent book and in media interviews.

And the reaction on the street by the casual voter was basically, “So what's new? Congress and our elected leaders are corrupt. We know it, but it is what it is.” That is a very sad commentary on those we elect to office.

The Washington Post has had a series of recent articles on abuse of congressional and government influence. Indeed, on February 8, the Post carried a front page article called, “Close Connections” that outlined several instances where congressmen and senators appropriated federal funds that enhanced their personal property values or went to institutions where family members were employed.

Again, this article only added to the terrible reputation that the general public has for “politics” and “politicians.” We seem to have accepted the notion that politicians are corrupt. And that is why the Prince William County Board of Supervisors’ current policy of spending unused office budgets on local projects without going through the normal budget process, should end immediately. To do otherwise is a disservice to the voters and to the taxpayers.

This policy oozes with the image of potential misuse of public funds and that is why this policy should change and change immediately.

This policy seems to be left over from an era when local government was hidden from the public and from honest oversight. And when the spotlight is put on this policy, the reaction by the Prince William County Board of Supervisors is to defend it and continue it. Amazing!

Prince William County’s neighboring jurisdictions have no similar program. Prince William County’s Chairman of the Board of Supervisors, Corey Stewart, is quoted as saying, “I personally don’t do it. I don’t know if I ever felt comfortable, even when I was a district supervisor, giving to charitable organizations from a government account.” Yet, Chairman Stewart has not offered a motion to a change this policy. Incredible!

The research director for the National Association of Counties said the number of counties with these discretionary funds has significantly dwindled in recent years because of abuse.

Jim Campbell, the Executive Director of the Virginia Association of Counties said discretionary funds were “not a common practice” in Virginia. But these discretionary funds – many reading this column would refer to them as “slush funds” in our normal conversations – continue in Prince William County.

It is as if this county’s Board of Supervisors wants to stoke the image of a government out of 1930’s that was run by a small group of manipulators who lined their pockets or those of their friends and allies.

Now, I know that is not the case in Prince William County. I know some of those Supervisors personally. They are friends and allies. But this practice of Supervisors being able to spend money from their office accounts on various local organizations outside the normal budget process simply should end.

Why is it that mature men and women, who are perfectly honest and forthright in their personal, business, civic and church lives, set up a system, or in this case allow a system set up in the past, to continue when it is so obvious that it should end? This use of unbudgeted tax dollars, hundreds of thousands of dollars a year total in these individual Supervisors’ “slush funds,” is asking for ridicule and only adds to the current belief that government and its elected political leaders skate near the line of corruption.

This policy should be ended immediately. To defend it seems to be totally out of touch with the desires of the voters. I believe the Supervisors in Prince William County, in a quiet moment when they sit alone and think about it, understand this policy of having a office slush fund should be ended and the unused tax money sent back to the General Fund for proper budget review and allocation.

Thomas Jefferson wrote in “A Summary View of the Rights of British America” published in 1774, “ ... the whole art of government consists in the art of being honest.”

The “Sage of Monticello” once again reaches down to us, this time from 238 years ago, to remind us that only good men can set up good government. And we all know that good people can do dumb things. That seems to be the case in Prince William County today.

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