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Consequences of `reform'

By Steve Hoffman, Beacon Journal editorial writer

Proponents of campaign finance limits in Akron city politics burst onto the scene in May 1998 with an incendiary study they said linked large contributors to large city contracts. Although the study was technically accurate, it failed to mention a significant fact (of which the proponents were well aware). More than 90 percent of the contracts had gone to the low bidder.

Such details didn't matter much to Dollars and Democracy, a coalition of two religious-based groups, the Northeast Ohio American Friends Service Committee and the Akron Catholic Commission. In departing from their anti-war, social-justice agenda, these groups had embraced the powerful resurgence of the 100-year-old traditions of the Progressive Movement.

Voters across the country once again had become disgusted with the political process. They were looking for answers. When one City Council member handed another an envelope of cash from an oil and gas developer just before a controversial vote on, of all things, an oil and gas well, the study and its flaws became irrelevant.

A brochure proclaimed ``the domination of dollars over democracy." A petition drive was started to put a reform measure on the November 1998 ballot. But reform what? Beyond the envelope of cash passed in a City Hall men's room, the picture was murky.

It could not be said that the Vestal Virgins were running City Hall. Major developers who had received unbid construction-management contracts on major downtown projects donated generously. Nevertheless, the big scandals were in county government.

Akron Mayor Don Plusquellic and his allies on the City Council, meanwhile, had made major strides in rebuilding the city. They ran cheap, grass-roots campaigns. They weren't getting arrested.

There was evidence, however, that Plusquellic was coming down hard on dissidents within his own party; they were the ones involved in the envelope-passing and the Dollars and Democracy petition drive.

Still, voters approved the charter amendment, by a wide margin.

The amendment, with \$100 contribution limits to ward candidates, \$300 limits to at-large council and mayoral candidates, some of the lowest in the country, was tangled up in court. Plusquellic was furious. He assembled a blue-ribbon committee, including Dr. John Green from the University of Akron, and got the council to pass an alternative measure, an ordinance with more realistic limits.

A counterplan by the do-gooders was hatched to bring spending limits and full public funding to municipal campaigns. This was put on the ballot twice, but Plusquellic beat it back by belaboring the obvious: If citizens were disgusted with politics, they would be even more disgusted if forced to spend their tax dollars on it.

Dollars and Democracy now finally has won a decisive legal victory with the U.S. Supreme Court's refusal to review a federal appeals court decision upholding the low contribution limits. The decision established that the limits do not conflict with constitutionally protected rights of

free speech. The limits will be in effect for this year's races for mayor and ward council seats.

“The will of the people has finally prevailed over the narrow self-interests of the mayor, city council and big fat political donors,” proclaimed Greg Coleridge of the American Friends Service Committee.

Despite public support for the reform initiative, there has been no groundswell against Plusquellic or his allies. In fact, the council dissidents were the ones who lost ground. The attorney who battled legal challenges against the ballot initiative, former City Councilman Warner Mendenhall, still feels a combination of low contributions and the availability of public funding would be powerful. As it stands, he feels that challengers who believe City Hall is under the grip of big-money interests will have a level playing field on which to wage campaigns against incumbents.

But in most campaigns these days, challengers have to outspend incumbents to win.

It may be that a fresh, new crop of city council candidates will emerge for this year's races for ward seats now that the Dollars and Democracy limits are in effect. It sure doesn't look that way now. The incumbents (all Democrats) probably will win, mostly because they are the incumbents and challengers can't raise enough money in \$100 increments to buy equivalent name recognition.

The irony for Plusquellic, who ran in 1999 without opposition and in 1995 with only write-in opposition, is that he will be getting a Republican opponent, most likely state Rep. Bryan Williams of Akron. (Williams' interest is the product of another reform measure, voter-approved term limits for state officials.)

Williams will be backed by Alex Arshinkoff, the Summit County GOP chairman who knows, far better than the Democrats, how to raise money from the well-heeled and how to find ways to spend it that avoid any kind of limits ever devised. For starters, the reform measure does not affect independent expenditures by parties or interest groups on behalf of candidates.

The ultimate irony, although unlikely, would be a victory by Williams, a conservative whose views would clash with just about everything Coleridge and Mendenhall stand for, by way of a shadow campaign backed by Arshinkoff's big donors.

How's that for reform?