

OpEd response submitted to the Beacon Journal on February 14, 2003

To the editor,

Why can't the Beacon Journal just accept the fact that low contribution limits and other campaign finance reforms passed overwhelmingly by Akron voters and affirmed by federal courts should be implemented? The law hasn't even been put in force yet the Beacon is already suggesting repeal, claiming that the results will be worse than what previously existed.

Beacon editorials consistently defended the status quo on financing Akron political campaigns when reformers sought to place our first measure on the city ballot in 1998. The main arguments against trying to get big money contributions out of elections, many from those connected to downtown construction corporations, were that passing anything meaningful would be advantageous to incumbents, would likely be unconstitutional, was not needed, would be incomplete, and would result in "unintended consequences."

When it was clear in 1998 that the people's initiative would make the ballot, out hurriedly came a Mayor's "Blue Ribbon Task Force." Its contribution "limits" for Mayor turned out to be higher than what was a legal contribution to the President of the United States of America. Some limits. The Task Force was an attempt to thwart the citizen initiative. The plan was later passed by council with the Beacon glowingly behind it.

Almost every downtown incumbent politician was hostile toward our contribution limits and later clean money initiatives. Strange since supposedly this was the crowd the Beacon time and again said would benefit most from low contribution limits and public financing.

On the constitutional question, the federal district and US Supreme Courts have spoken. Who's left to appeal to, secret military tribunals? It's time for the politicians and the law department to do their job -- implement the law. The City has received a free ride from the Beacon for actually arguing against the law in court that it was supposed to defend. That needs to change.

As far as the need for reform, area businessman Michael Lampers, former city insider Ray Kapper, and former city councilman Dave Portis were all found guilty related to exchanging money for favors or illegal campaign contributions. Lampers was ordered by the court to pay a fine to our reform campaign while Kapper and Portis are now sitting in jail. Our research at the time showed those who made large campaign contributions received large construction contracts. The argument that such contracts only went to the low bidder is a sham. The Beacon surely knows how the system works -- the city Board of Control, composed of Mayoral appointees, routinely reworks low-bid contracts skyward, which costs taxpayers. Then of course are the large number of no-bid contracts, which the Beacon editorialists admit benefit major developers who donate generously.

The Beacon claims that at best the law will be "clumsy" to enforce. What's so hard about creating a set of penalties for politicians who raise more than the legal limits or for not writing down contributor home addresses on campaign disclosure forms? Contribution limits and disclosure rules are on the book in dozens of cities. Just pick up the phone and make a few calls.

On the topic of its incompleteness, we agree. Contribution limits and other reforms are not as extensive as getting private money out of public elections altogether -- reforms known as Clean Money. Local reformers tried to enact Clean Money via citizen initiatives in 2000 and 2001. The Beacon opposed those efforts both times. Contribution limits however are at least speed bumps to

those who want to buy, rent, or lease public officials or incumbent politicians who shake down legitimate businesses for “contributions.”

The issue of “unintended consequences,” namely the creation of so-called independent groups apart from any candidate, is a problem. It will forever remain so until the fictitious notion that money equals speech, as defended in the 1976 Buckley v Valeo Supreme Court decision, is overturned. Money is property, not speech. Since the City already has a history of appealing to the US Supreme Court on the issue of money and politics, campaign reformers here and across the country no doubt would be delighted to have the City of Akron join the effort to fundamentally remove this undemocratic impediment to political elections.

In the meantime, let the law be enforced, examined and as needed, improved upon with the Beacon assuming the important role of watch-dog and whistle-blower.

Finally, Beacon editorialists claim that many of us reformers departed from our “social-justice agenda” when we began working on campaign finance reform in the late 1990’s. Nothing could be further from the truth. Removing big money from politics is precisely a social-justice issue. Issues of housing, poverty, health care, jobs, and many others will never, ever improve so long as big money private interest contributors have a grip over public officials and public policies.

Akron has a chance for a social change to benefit social justice. The time to implement that change is now.

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