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Question for Hawaii Lawmakers: Do Slush Funds and Public Funds Mix?

By Rep. Gene Ward, R-Hawaii Kai, 5/13/2008 1:55:50 AM



Senate Bill 661 was passed in the 2008 Legislative Session to establish a pilot project for the Big Island County Council to provide public funding for its future elections.

In a recent letter to the media, I explained that after listening to my colleague from the Big Island, Rep. Robert Herkes, I spoke with strong reservations but still voted for the legislation, something that even my office staff misunderstood and misreported my vote in the article because I was so disturbed by what Rep. Herkes said about each Hawaii County Councilperson receiving \$300,000 in "slush funds" from taxpayers to do with what they wish to promote their reelection.

He said that a total of \$2,700,000 per year was used in highly politically leveraged situations. I have since learned that these funds are simply called "contingency funds," and other county councils have similar funds, for example, the Honolulu City Council has such funds, but provides only \$18,000 per member per year.

These funds are also supposed to go to non-profits and be in line with existing department programs, but council members are allowed to "shop these programs around," and tweak applications to fit the circumstances required. These funds are disbursed through council resolutions and have no audit trail publicly available to see if the money was spent as intended.

As a state legislator I'm concerned that we get this pilot program right from the beginning, but wonder if choosing the Big Island was the right choice for the kick-off?

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