



Piling pork in the budget

With all the high-profile disputes over the budget and taxes for teacher pay raises, the voters have not heard the grunts of the pigs at the trough of the state Treasury. They're there all the same. The Blanco administration's budget bill is loaded with pork, special-interest appropriations larded into the budget without discussion or debate.

Discussed by no one, the pile of special-interest items is a huge unmentioned pig on the table at the Senate Finance Committee, where the House-passed budget awaits further action.

Some of the slew of House amendments to the bill are certainly worthy causes in the abstract. Who's against a little state money for museums or zoos, the New Orleans Jazz Orchestra or the Edward Douglass White State Commemorative Area? At \$40,000 here or \$25,000 there, all of these things are treated as small change in the state budget.

But the list of small items grows to dozens of pages of listings as legislators take care of favored groups or facilities in their districts. In most cases, these are in addition to regular state appropriations to the museums or councils on aging or other groups or local political bodies. The Public Affairs Research Council reported that there is about \$16 million in pet projects in the appropriations bill.

Why is that a bad thing? Politics, and the lack of accountability.

A budget process controlled by the governor and her legislative leaders can bestow these "small" amounts to legislators who toe the party line. The legislators get publicity and gratitude for bringing home the bacon.

That kind of influence peddling with taxpayers' money has gone on for a long time, but the longer it does -- when taxes must be raised for real state priorities such as education and health care -- the more it distorts the political process.

Further, these appropriations don't go through any real scrutiny.

At least a theoretical defense against wasteful government spending is the idea that programs ought to be able to demonstrate their worth. If adopted by leadership fiat, in cahoots with a local legislator, the taxpayers' money is spent without debate about whether the cash would be better spent on, say, health care and education.

And with a legislator's backing, who is going to question what the favored

groups actually do with the money?

This whole process is an open scandal, and it's getting worse -- so much so that some legislators are starting to complain.

In the Finance Committee, Sen. Joe McPherson said he wants more accountability for the local "economic development" agencies and projects that individual lawmakers shove into the budget each year without performance requirements or expectations attached to the spending.

McPherson, D-Woodworth, said he plans to offer an amendment to the budget bill that would require those agencies and projects be pitched to the Department of Economic Development to determine whether they should get funding.

While that is a step toward accountability, it doesn't address the overarching problem of political spending. A state department might be able to enforce the performance standards, or it might not, if the legislator sponsoring the appropriation is sufficiently powerful.

The best response to pork-barrel spending is to strip the budget of these appropriations entirely.

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