

Political Horizons for Mar. 21, 2010

Information that really isn't

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After hours of poring over campaign financial disclosures, I took a break by looking for something to watch amid the abundance of 300-plus channels of television.

On that recent midnight dreary, while I channel-surfed weak and weary, I came across a nature program about ravens. These intelligent birds relentlessly torment bald eagles to steal their food, lead wolves to kill prey that the birds then scavenge, and fake hiding places in plain sight to throw off competitors.

Ravens are cunning enough to be misleading. Who knew?

Similarly, campaign financial disclosures are full of information. But the reports lack those vital pieces of data that would help taxpayers learn about the officials they have allowed to manage the public treasury.

The information may be in plain sight but it's not accessible, largely because of the way the reports don't include certain information.

Jim Brandt, president of the Public Affairs Research Council of Louisiana, the nonprofit group that researches government policies, said the Louisiana campaign finance reports don't identify the donors' employers or occupations, and that's a problem. Without those bits of data, identifying which industries and what companies are influencing government policy becomes virtually impossible, he said.

"Unless you really dig and do the associations, (the disclosures) don't tell you anything, other than amount, name and address," Brandt said. "You need the associations to understand the context."

Elected officials spend public tax dollars. Knowing who supports what official can indicate to taxpayers why certain businesses get contracts and how spending decisions are made.

The total amount an individual contributes is limited by law. This leads to the practice of "bundling" Bundling is collecting the maximum individual contributions from a number of

individuals who share similar wants. By grouping the checks, they use their contributions to leverage influence with their champion — the candidate hoping to take the reins of power.

Perhaps the most well-known example for Gov. Bobby Jindal is the Chouest family's \$135,000 in contributions for the 2007 gubernatorial campaign, and the governor, shortly after taking office in 2008, releasing \$10 million in tax dollars to pay for improvements at a business owned by the Chouest family.

Jindal's campaign finance disclosures show 36,848 contributions since he started running for governor in early 2006. But the way the details are entered onto the forms defeats the grouping functions of database programs, such as Microsoft Access. For instance, the software requires the information to be so similar that the same street address that spells out the "street" is not grouped with the one that abbreviates that same street, such as "avenue" and "ave."

"They set up a system where they could follow the law technically, but not in spirit" said Elliott Stonecipher, a political operative who has worked on many campaigns including the one that elected Gov. Buddy Roemer.

Stonecipher calls the campaign financial disclosures the third leg of an ethics stool that also includes disclosures of public officials' personal finances and adequate enforcement. His analogy is that if one leg weakens, the entire ethics structure falls.

A simple solution would be to adopt the same reporting standards in Louisiana that the federal government requires for its campaign contribution disclosures. That is, requiring candidates to identify the employer and occupation of each donor.

PAR pushed such an idea as far back as 1995. A bill seeking the additional information was filed in 2008 but never received a hearing.

Brandt said over the years the issue has never gotten traction.

It still hasn't, said state Rep. Rick Gallot, D-Ruston, who chairs the House and Governmental Affairs Committee that would hear such legislation. "At this point I don't see much interest in it," Gallot said.

Basically, Gallot says, until the public raises a fuss, all that tapping on the legislative chamber door will lead to nothing more.

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