

The Gadsden Times

Lifting the veil of secrecy on spending

Guest editorial by Kay Ivey

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Dear Fellow Citizens:

How do you feel about your tax dollars being spent to celebrate mules, watermelons, and even aliens from outer space? It would be funny — if it weren't actually happening. And unless something is done, even more of the money you send to Montgomery will be frittered away just like this, too; and you'll never know.

I'm writing this to explain what I intend to do to lift the veil of secrecy that hides "special projects" spending by legislators.

As your state treasurer, I serve as vice chairwoman of the state Executive Commission on Community Service Grants (ECCSG). Other members of the commission are: Lt. Gov. Jim Folsom, Jr. (chairman), State Superintendent of Education Dr. Joe Morton (secretary), and Commissioner of Agriculture and Industries Ron Sparks, who is also a candidate for governor in 2010.

I simply want to bring openness and transparency to state spending so you know exactly how your tax dollars are being spent and in what amounts. Sound reasonable?

On Wednesday, the ECCSG will meet and consider my proposals for revising rules that will ensure transparency so all can know:

- where legislative "community grants" are sent;
- in what amounts;
- for what projects, as requested by whom.

I am also proposing that grant applications be posted on the ECCSG chairman's website at least 30 days in advance of a CSG meeting for review by us taxpayers.

If the new rules changes are adopted, it is important that they be written not to overburden the legislators, nor unnecessarily delay disbursement.

Some background information is in order...

Each year, legislators hand out millions of dollars for community service projects. In the current fiscal year that ends Sept. 30, they authorized \$2 million be appropriated from the General Fund for Community Service Grants in addition to millions more from the Education Trust Fund. In the new 2010 fiscal year that starts on Oct. 1, it jumps to \$6.5 million. (What a coincidence — it's an election year.)

But here is what's especially troubling: of the 414 new grant requests from the General Fund, only a few specify where the money would actually go. Others don't even say how the money would be spent! And these have been submitted and approved by the Legislative Advisory Council even before new rules have been considered by the ECCSG for the General Fund applications.

This is government at its worst: spending your tax money without accountability.

In 2007, I tried to create more openness and accountability in the process by proposing rules revisions of the ECCSG for similar grants which are funded only by the Education Fund. I was unanimously voted down, and the politicians kept doling out the cash with little or no transparency.

I want to be clear about something: there are indeed many genuinely worthy community projects that could use additional financial assistance during these hard times. I understand and sympathize with their situation. I am a citizen and a taxpayer, too, and I care very deeply about our communities all across Alabama. But right is right and wrong is wrong.

We simply don't have the luxury of helping all the projects we'd like to fund right now. Our state government is currently under 11 percent proration. On top of that, 40 percent of the General Fund comes from federal stimulus dollars — and that money will be gone after another year. In the absence of a growing economy and with unrestricted spending, the coming financial crisis could hit us like a freight train.

It's past time for reform. We must stand up and stamp out pork spending. This is an unaffordable practice and it places pure politics ahead of essential priorities.

I believe the Community Service Grants program is the place to start. It's part of over \$60 million in pork spending in our budgets ... and that's only the amount that I and others have been able to identify. The actual figure could be even higher.

It's high time we, the people, pull back the curtain of secrecy surrounding how our money is spent. Let's bring openness, transparency and accountability to you, the hardworking, taxpaying citizens of Alabama.

After all, the people's money is the people's business!

Kay Ivey is Alabama's State Treasurer and a Republican candidate for governor in 2010. She can be reached by email at: kay@kayivey.org.