

The Local Contributor Database

Raising Public Confidence in Public Servants



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George Bailey stood on an icy bridge. He once dreamed of college, traveling the world. But his dreams never materialized. His service to the family bank, the people who depended on it, kept him home.

He was overcome by despair. About to plunge into the freezing river, George was saved by an angel named Clarence. Clarence shows George how he has helped people, home town people.

George had saved his brother's life. He had stopped the pharmacist from making a tragic mistake. He helped people buy homes. And, George prevented the corrupt Mr. Potter from exploiting the misfortunes of others.

Many serving in municipal government share at least one thing in common with George Bailey, the hero of the classic film "It's a Wonderful Life."

They feel unappreciated.

THE LOCAL CONTRIBUTOR DATABASE
ON ELEC'S WEBSITE MAKES IT EASIER
FOR CITIZENS TO FIND OUT WHAT
FIRMS ARE CONTRIBUTING TO THEIR
MUNICIPAL OFFICIALS AND HOW MUCH.

The current national political climate only compounds that feeling. Following the near-collapse of the economy, voters are highly anxious and disgruntled. Their negative mood has caused a tsunami of change that tore through the presidential election of 2008 and recent contests in Virginia, New Jersey and Massachusetts.

Municipalities where candidates raised more than \$200,000 per election in 2009. Includes candidates for mayoral and council seats

Municipality	Total Receipts	Total Expenditures	Type
Jersey City	\$ 6,215,391	\$ 5,867,403	May Municipal
Hoboken City	\$ 1,207,031	\$ 993,428	General
Hoboken City	\$ 842,994	\$ 790,234	May Municipal
Edison Township	\$ 795,446	\$ 796,251	Primary
East Orange City	\$ 674,653	\$ 610,437	Primary
Passaic City	\$ 527,920	\$ 491,043	May Municipal
Englewood City	\$ 449,919	\$ 435,111	Primary
Brick Township	\$ 360,872	\$ 282,969	General
Hoboken City	\$ 327,209	\$ 310,247	Runoff
Gloucester Township	\$ 313,633	\$ 294,460	General
Edison Township	\$ 291,917	\$ 291,917	General
Plainfield City	\$ 269,381	\$ 270,169	Primary
Atlantic City	\$ 251,963	\$ 256,707	Primary
Hackensack City	\$ 220,569	\$ 198,609	May Municipal
Brick Township	\$ 212,042	\$ 61,575	Primary
Toms River (Dover Twp)	\$ 206,066	\$ 216,126	General

Source: Election Law Enforcement Commission

Fairly or unfairly, local officials are the ones who bare the brunt of voter dissatisfaction. One party replaces another, with the hope that intractable problems can be solved.

Though voters justifiably want good government, they can easily overlook the magnitude of personal sacrifice made by individuals serving in municipal government.

Local citizens see their property taxes rising, or read about pay-to-play. They hear about the local Mr. Potter being indicted for taking bribes, and they assume all officials are bad.

In the current climate there is little recognition of the fact that the vast majority of municipal officials are decent, honest and responsible men and women who serve honorably, often in a volunteer capacity.

These men and women are community minded, upholding the best of civic virtue.

As a member of a local governing body, you don't just attend one meeting a month. Besides regular council or committee meetings, there are meetings of the local planning and zoning boards, or of the public works committee.

As chairs of subcommittees, municipal officials oversee important local services involving police, fire, water and sewerage. When an emergency occurs they are on the scene.

Further, their outside activities often also benefit the community. These men and women coach in recreational programs, are involved in local service organizations, and may be volunteer firemen.

Municipal officials deserve credit and the appreciation of fellow citizens for the time and effort they put into their community. And this is a prime reason why the New Jersey Election Law Enforcement Commission (ELEC) unveiled a local contributor database.

This initiative is designed to foster a better informed citizenry, and in so doing awaken the public to the fact that the vast number of municipal officials serve with the best of intentions.

On the other hand, there are some

corrupt Mr. Potters in the municipal government barrel. Over the past eight years, several hundred corruption cases have been prosecuted in New Jersey, with many involving municipally elected officials. This new initiative will be helpful in this realm as well, helping the public monitor pay-to-play and law enforcement to track any wrong doing connected with campaign finance.

These twin goals are aimed at enhancing public trust in both municipal and county government.

In a recent Op-Ed article in the Bergen Record, subsequently published in www.NewJerseyNewsroom.com, I posed the question "So why should more attention be paid to local contests?"

Who's In Charge? by Dr. Laura H Kahn is a very interesting and readable book that all elected officials should read. It provides an historic perspective of epidemics and bioterrorist attacks that sets the stage for the real focus of the book – leadership during a crisis. You will finish this book with a much better understanding of the critical components needed to effectively and efficiently address any crisis – collaboration, communication and informed leaders from multiple sectors. Understanding these critical components is reinforced through the telling of behind the scenes summaries of actual public health events. Go to Amazon (www.amazon.com) or Barnes and Noble (www.barnesandnoble.com) to order a copy at a reduced rate.

The answer, I said, "is simple: many important decisions are made by municipal officials that directly impact our citizens, both in terms of their pocketbooks and their quality of life.

This responsibility makes it hard to please voters even in good times. On the one hand, state mandates and services that citizens have come to expect put pressure on local officials to develop budgets that meet these needs. On the other, elected officials face pushback from those upset over property taxes.

Local officials are being required to justify every dollar they spend. As a result, awards of public contracts often draw controversy, particularly when the winners are major political donors.

Private contractors are major beneficiaries of public spending.

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, local government expenditures (includes municipal and county) in New Jersey from 2005-2006 amounted to almost \$40 billion. Undoubtedly, this figure has increased since that time.

The expenditures made by municipal governments include those for social services, transportation, education, police, fire, housing, parks, and a host of other functions, including outlays for capital development.

The implementation of these services as well as capital development projects often requires the assistance of private contractors. Therefore, much money is

spent locally in awarding professional service contracts and other contracted services, in some instances subject to bidding laws and practices, and in some instances not.

During 2008, municipalities awarded \$800 million in public works. These public contracts, rightly or wrongly, have become more closely scrutinized as interest in pay-to-play has grown at all levels of government.

This concern, and the flurry of state laws and municipal ordinances accompanying it, in part stems from fears over campaign contributions and any potential link those donations have with the awarding of public contracts.

Contracts awarded by state government, its various instrumentalities, through contracts awarded by county and municipal governments, and school districts, have become the focus of citizen and media attention, in particular with regard to suspected links to campaign contributions.

Campaign financial activity at the local level has increased steadily over the years. A report by the New Jersey Election Law Enforcement Commission (ELEC) published in 2005 showed that in 50 randomly selected communities, more than \$162 million was raised and \$144 million spent by candidates between 1994 and 2004.

Data from 2009 that is now easy to view on ELEC's website (www.elec.state.nj.us) indicates that municipal candidates, including those running in May non-partisan elections, raised a total \$24.9 million and spent \$22.6 million. Figures released previously did not include data for May municipal and June runoff elections.

An analysis found that fundraising topped \$200,000 in 16 municipalities, not the least of which was the \$6.2 million raised by Jersey City candidates. Moreover, fundraising exceeded \$100,000 in 27 other municipalities.

The Commission made public its local contributor database in November 2009. This initiative dovetails with pay-to-play annual disclosure of contributions made by public contractors, which takes place in April. Those reports show how much money individual contracting firms earned from public agencies in New Jersey.

The local contributor database on ELEC's website makes it easier for citizens to find out what firms are contributing to their municipal officials and how much. Another part of the website allows the public to determine if the contributor received a public contract.

The local contributor database can assist municipal officials as well as citizens. By simply keying in the name of an individual or business that is competing for a public contract, officials can easily determine whether a contribution has been made and whether it has violated the letter or spirit of the pay-to-play laws.

From the perspective of a municipal official, the local contributor database can be very useful in helping to avoid the reality or even the appearance of violating pay-to-play laws.

In conclusion, the New Jersey Election Law Enforcement Commission is a quasi-judicial agency. It combines the functions of disclosure and enforcement. In this time of cynicism towards government at all levels, deserved or undeserved, it has an additional challenge; to contribute to a more informed electorate and thereby increase trust in a basic institution of society, namely, government and the people in it.

Initiatives such as the local contributor database, and others like it, serve that very vital purpose. ▲

Jeff Brindle is the Executive Director of the New Jersey Election Law Enforcement Commission. The opinions presented here are his own and not necessarily those of the Commission.

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