

Why lobbyists are needed

Augusta Chronicle Editorial Staff

Sunday, August 7, 2005

In a more perfect world, taxpayers' money would not be spent to lobby for more taxpayers' money. But we don't live in a perfect world - we live in the real world, and sometimes in the real world, idealism has to take a backseat to practicality.

For instance, the Aiken County Taxpayers Association is upset that the city of Aiken is earmarking \$36,000 of taxpayers' money to hire lobbyists in Washington to help get federal funds for local road improvements.

Winfred Ray, speaking for the tax-and-spend watchdog group, says local governments ought to stop lobbying state and federal governments for money. "This is where a lot of your pork comes in," he said.

Of course, he's right. And we applaud him and his organization for bringing attention to the issue. How's it possible to reduce spending and cut taxes when different units of government keep hitting each other up for more and more taxpayer money?

It's obscene - but because we have to function in the world as it is, instead of as it should be, it's necessary. Washington lobbyists - or consultants, as they prefer to be called - were crucial in getting North Augusta and Aiken County \$160 million for the long-awaited Palmetto Parkway extension.

If Aiken's consultants are successful, they could bring in \$25 million for the city's road improvement program. That's a great return on a \$36,000 investment.

Each year, taxpayers send more than a trillion dollars to the federal government, which then borrows many hundreds of thousands of dollars more. That's a lot of money - too much to ignore. The road funding Aiken is seeking probably will come from the humongous, pork-laden \$286.4 billion highway and transportation bill Congress just passed.

If local communities are to get any of that money back, they have to fight for it. In simpler times, legislative delegations would wage the good battle. They still do, of course, but there's so much money, bureaucracy, applications and complications to deal with that it has become far too difficult for lawmakers to exploit, or even keep track of, all the opportunities available.

They need the help of specialists who know what projects are eligible for funding, and where to get it. Consultants aren't hired just to find money, either - but also to affect policy. They played a key role in keeping Fort Gordon off the base realignment and closure list.

Currently, Augusta has no Washington or Atlanta lobbyists on the payroll, but it is one of the items on city Administrator Fred Russell's wish list. "It's the way of the future," he says. "You can hardly afford not to."

The proper role for cost-conscious, fiscally conservative Americans is to continue fighting for less spending and smaller government as a matter of policy. But after the policy is set, the budget finalized and the spending begins, it's simply being realistic, and not a betrayal of principle, to fight for a fair share of the spoils.

From the Monday, August 8, 2005 printed edition of the Augusta Chronicle