

To: House State Administration Members



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Opinion desk: 447-4065
bill.sullivan@helenair.com

Opinion

QUESTION OF THE WEEK
Do you approve of the Republicans' budget strategy in the Montana House?

Send your thoughts to the IR by Friday. You can submit your response at www.Helenair.com, mail it to the IR, P.O. Box 4249, Helena, MT 59604, e-mail it to irsatir@Helenair.com, or fax it to 447-4052. We'll report on your responses the following Monday.

Let's close a real loophole

At a time when legislators are bringing partisan warfare to draft new levels, there still appears to be a consensus of sorts on the need to ensure better regulation of "constituency service accounts." Currently, elected officials not only can dump unspent campaign contributions into such accounts, but they can — and do — solicit even more money for the accounts. What we have here, not to put too fine a point on it, is a slush fund. And it is a fund being



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augmented by gifts to elected officials, gifts that they can use for travel expenses and other costs of interacting with the voters. This whole business lies somewhere along the fuzzy line between serving constituents and getting an early start on the next campaign. Both the Senate and the House have passed separate bills to address this ethics loophole, but only one of them addresses it effectively. Senate Bill 91, sponsored by Sen.

Carol Williams, D-Missoula, flat-out states that "no other funds" (beside campaign donations already vetted by campaign finance disclosure rules) may be put into the accounts, and the money "must" be used only for expenses incurred in representing constituents. The other measure, House Bill 462 by Rep. Diane Sands, D-Missoula, says that elected officials "may accept donations from individuals for deposit in the constituent services account." Helena attorney Jonathan Moll, an expert on political ethics laws, said

this bill could be called the "incumbent protection act." It would let office holders amass a fund of contributions separate from campaign funds and a fund unavailable to future opponents. The appearance of impropriety is obvious. How many people donate money to a politician without hoping to get something in return for their investment? We think the Legislature should choose to enact the language of Senate Bill 91, a law that really would snap this loophole shut.

From:

Elizabeth Andrews
Montana Consumer Cause
(406) 459-1377