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Editorial: An 'incestuous circle'

How do government groups fund political activities?

An Orange County Register editorial

Prominent California politicians have accused the League of California Cities, the California Association of Counties and the California Redevelopment Association of using taxpayer dollars to advance their noxious campaign to stop eminent domain reform. Taxpayers should not be forced to fund political campaigns of any sort, and it's particularly egregious if their money is used to fund government assaults on property rights.

The June primary will feature two eminent-domain-related initiatives: Proposition 98, which offers genuine restrictions on the abuse of eminent domain, and Prop. 99, which pretends to reform eminent domain laws but offers only superficial changes; it is

meant to dilute support for the meatier reform initiative. The above-mentioned government groups are using their funds to stop 98 and promote 99.

"The evidence strongly suggests that public dollars are being used inappropriately," U.S. Rep. John Campbell, R-Irvine, told Register reporter Brian Joseph in an article Saturday.

The scheme is complicated, but this is the gist of it: The groups are accused of concealing the source of their funds through something called "major donor" accounts – a type of political action committee that typically receives contributions from wealthy benefactors.

"[Rep]. Campbell and the others, however, don't believe the associations actually qualify as major donors because their primary revenue isn't from the sale of widgets but rather membership fees from local governments," the Register article explained. The organizations are trying to chalk up these allegations to politics, but critics of these government groups have long wondered where they get all their political dollars given that they are government groups. The groups say they get their money through magazine ad revenue and seminars.

But, as the article pointed out, these groups use taxpayer dollars to fund their magazines

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and their conferences. And, as Anaheim Mayor Curt Pringle argued in an e-mail: "If you believe that this is a legal funding tactic, then one needs to explain how League employees work on political campaigns in a process funded by taxpayer dollars. ... I believe that there is a continual commingling-mingling of campaign and League resources."

Rep. Campbell calls this "an incestuous circle," as governments use tax dollars to lobby for more tax dollars, or, in this case, to stop efforts to halt their anti-property-rights policies. He notes that governments abuse eminent domain so that they can lure tax-rich projects. "Cities and counties are in a lot of trouble," he said. They've made unsustainable promises to their unions and, rather than adopting fiscally responsible policies, they constantly look for ways to bring in additional tax dollars.

They certainly shouldn't force taxpayers to fund this process. So Rep. Campbell has asked the California Fair Political Practices Commission to investigate the matter. There's an even easier solution. These government groups should open their books and let the public see how its dollars are being used.

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