

IT'S TIME TO BUILD A WALL BETWEEN POLITICIANS AND EMPLOYEES

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The recent reports of generous gift giving by the Jefferson Parish Government employees to Parish President Aaron Broussard echo the gift-giving practices in Mandeville. Where did this practice of employees being pressured by department heads to pony up money for expensive holiday and birthday gifts for the head honcho begin? What kind of culture creates an environment where elected officials are comfortable accepting gifts from their employees and government contractors? Should the state enact laws that more strictly limit the use of campaign funds? And lastly, should public employees be prohibited from working on politician's political campaigns?

There is no doubt that the residents of Louisiana deserve better behavior from our politicians. We have endured a seemingly endless parade of public officials accused of wrongdoing; some of the cases have gone through the legal system and resulted in convictions. State Senators, Parish Presidents, Chief Administrative Officers, Mayors, Council Members, Assessors, Judges, and appointed board members all come to mind.

The political corruption seems to unite us like not much else does except our love of the New Orleans Saints. It spans political, geographic, racial, and social boundaries and has been called out in New Orleans and the suburbs; it's on both shores of the lake; and is displayed by both recently-elected or appointed politicians as well as with those who have been elected or appointed numerous times. At a recent Tammany Together meeting, Rafael Goyeneche from the Metropolitan Crime Commission told the attendees that the investigations regarding North Shore politicians and contractors aren't over and that residents should expect more revelations and arrests.

It's time for this public corruption to end. We can no longer pay the high costs for these continued "wink and a nod" business and political dealings. It's obvious that our much-touted ethics laws are inadequate and nothing short of adopting the "not even a cup of coffee" restrictions need to be enacted. Short of this gold standard reform, let's begin by ending the practice of gift-giving by public employees to their bosses. Prohibit all gifts, regardless of the price, period. Stop wasting time and money collecting money from employees. Stop using peer pressure to ensure 100% voluntary compliance. End this coerced giving now. Give them a card or send them an email greeting, but no more!

In the Jefferson Parish case, it was reported that Parish President Aaron Broussard reciprocated the gift-giving gesture and that it was all done in the spirit of the season. It was noted that his largesse came not from private funds, but from his campaign account. Is it appropriate that campaign funds be used so that someone can play Santa Claus? Do donors have certain expectations about how campaign donations are used? Should our laws further restrict the activities that can be paid for using these donations?

Lastly, public employees should not be a part of any one's political campaign regardless of whether they are protected by civil service rules or not. Many public employees are not part of the civil service system and politicians view their employees as ready-made volunteers to help stuff envelopes, work phone banks, put up campaign signs, work fundraising events, or make campaign contributions. There is no doubt that some of these employees enjoy this work and want to see their bosses re-elected. It is equally true that other employees are coerced or bullied into volunteering by overzealous supervisors. What happens to these employees when a new person is elected? How much more difficult is it for a challenger to overcome these built-in volunteers and mount a serious campaign?

It is disappointing that some public officials don't recognize that these practices are not ethical behavior. It is disappointing that so many public servants walk the fine edge of the law and that we are forced to write laws to try to enforce decent behavior. It is now up to us to demand our legislators change the laws. In the mean time, we'll have to make due with the court of public opinion and start holding our public servants to higher standards.