

## Clean Elections: The Solution for Alaska Politics

There have been many reactions to the bribery and corruption scandal that has enveloped Juneau since the vote-buying that VECO Corporation engaged in for years finally saw the light of day. Many predicted it for a long time. Some were shocked, amazed, saddened or even elated. There were those who pointed more fingers and spoke of other shoes still to drop.

The Governor and the Legislature immediately began to talk about solutions, ways to change the culture in Juneau. But bribery was against the law before VECO started peppering cash around the capitol. Conspiracy, mail fraud, tax fraud, money laundering, extortion and corruption have been illegal for some time. The Legislature is strengthening the laws governing ethics, including requiring full disclosure of payments our citizen legislators receive, which will help. But it won't address the systemic problem undermining Alaska politics.

This was not simply a few bad apples. If this scandal shows us anything, it's that we need to address the whole tree, starting with the roots. And the root, as we all know, is money.

That's why AkPIRG is proposing a real solution to corruption in politics – Clean Elections. Clean Elections are publicly-funded elections, in which candidates gather a required number of signatures and small donations to qualify for public funding. Candidates also agree to strict spending limits in exchange for the funding.

This rids campaign politics of the special interest money that floods the political scene each election. While VECO executives admit to having bribed a handful of legislators outright, VECO employees have contributed to dozens of campaigns. In fact, VECO campaign contributions to state candidates total nearly \$600,000 in the past decade. Going back further, to 1990, VECO, its employees and their family members gave the state and national Republican parties, GOP congressional candidates and President Bush slightly more than \$1 million, according the Center for Responsive Politics.

With Clean Elections, corporations and special interests can't buy their way into the halls of government with large campaign contributions. Special interest money is simply taken out of the equation. This puts people back in charge of the electoral process and their democracy. Candidates are no longer beholden to a small number or large donors, but are free to serve the actual voters that elected them.

Clean Elections laws are working in other states and localities – from Maine to Arizona. In Arizona, after 4 election cycles using Clean Elections, 83% of voters support the system. The current governor of Arizona was elected using Clean Elections financing, as were the secretary of state, attorney general, and 38 of the state's legislators.

In Maine, the system is equally popular. Eighty one percent of candidates used Clean Elections financing in 2006, up from 78% in 2004, and 60% in 2002. An April 2007 report by the Maine Commission on Governmental Ethics and Election Practices finds that Clean Elections has sharply reduced private contributions to candidates; provided more choices for voters; controlled the growth in spending by legislative candidates; and leveled the playing field between candidates for public office.

In Connecticut in 2004, Governor John G. Rowland resigned from office during a corruption

investigation. He later pleaded guilty in federal court to conspiracy to commit fraud and served ten months in a federal prison. This and other scandals cost the state tens of millions of dollars. In reaction, the Connecticut legislature became the first legislature to pass Clean Elections legislation in late 2005.

As Senator Bill Wielechowski noted when talking about Clean Elections and VECO's affect on the Petroleum Production Tax (PPT), Alaska has potentially lost \$1 billion a year because votes were traded for money and campaign contributions. Alaska cannot afford to let that continue. The system must change.

Alaskans are still in shock from the recent indictments and future indictments that certainly loom. The public's trust in their elected official is severely shaken. It is time that the Governor and the Legislature embrace real reform and bring Clean Elections to Alaska.