

# The Pueblo Chieftain

## Ethics in government

**October 8, 2006**

Amendment 41

Prohibits public officials and government workers from accepting gifts worth more than \$50 in a year.

Bans lobbyists from giving gifts of meals.

Bans former lawmakers from lobbying for two years.

Creates ethics commission to hear complaints.

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### **YES: No free lunch - or cell phone, plane ticket or Broncos seat By JARED POLIS and PETE MAYSMITH**

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Jared Polis and Pete Maysmith are co-chairs of Coloradans for Clean Government. Polis is vice chairman of the state Board of Education and an entrepreneur; Maysmith is an executive with Common Cause.

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A growing number of ethics violations at all levels of government, combined with the ever-increasing power of special interests and their lobbyists, are further eroding public trust in government, which is already at alarmingly low levels.

Here in Colorado, special interests have fueled an unprecedented expansion of lobbying - we have the fourth highest lobbyist-legislator ratio in the nation, with 11 lobbyists per state legislator.

The amount lobbyists are paid per year has tripled to \$22.1 million in a decade and lobbyists spend \$1.6 million annually on gifts, entertainment and other expenses to influence public policy.

State legislators and Gov. Bill Owens received more than \$200,000 in gifts and free trips from lobbyists in 2005, including hand-held computers, Broncos tickets, river tours and international travel.

Coloradans are fed up with the corrupting influence of all the freebies and cozy relationships and question whether public officials are fighting for their interests or for special interests.

To restore trust in government, it is crucial to have in place common-sense, meaningful restrictions that protect the public interest: 26 states ban or restrict lobbyist gifts, 27 states require a cooling-off period before former public officials can lobby their former colleagues and 39 states have an ethics commission. Colorado has none of the above.

That is why Coloradans for Clean Government support Amendment 41. The Ethics in Government Initiative raises ethical standards by:

Banning lobbyist gifts to public officials,

Establishing reasonable restrictions on gift-giving from non-lobbyists,

Preventing state legislators and statewide elected officials from becoming paid lobbyists for two years after leaving office, and

Creating an independent ethics commission.

A group of lobbyists who dislike the lobbyist gift ban but know that they'll get little sympathy are using scare tactics, hoping to create a smoke screen.

Fabricated concerns, bogus examples and quoting language out of context are the primary tools of their misinformation campaign, which seeks to exploit the admiration and respect we all have for public servants, and particularly for the courageous men and women who protect our lives and property. Plain and simple, Amendment 41 does not restrict scholarships, research grants, funds for injured firefighters or anything provided to a government employee or member of his or her family that has no reasonable connection to influencing a public decision.

The irresponsible examples cited by opponents clearly fall outside its scope. The clearly stated purpose of this ethics initiative is to "avoid conduct that is in violation of their public trust; any effort to realize personal financial gain through public service . . . is a violation of that trust."

On the other hand, gifts from a building owner to an elevator inspector or from a restaurateur to a public health inspector would most likely be subject to Amendment 41. And they should be, for public safety and consumer health.

In addition to its narrow purpose and specific scope, Amendment 41 purposefully does not define gifts and various terms, allowing the Legislature to eliminate any misinterpretations through enabling legislation. And the built-in checks and balances of the commission's makeup will ensure that rules are fair and sensible.

By approving Amendment 41 this November, Colorado will take an important step toward restoring faith in government.

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