



## **Cleaner government Not just a good idea; it should be the law**

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If the new statewide government-ethics law wins in November, the story goes, deserving children of University of Colorado employees will be unable to accept scholarships. Injured firefighters won't be eligible for charitable assistance.

Last year, Colorado's 35 state senators received \$41,102 in gifts, or more than \$1,170 apiece, reports Coloradans for Clean Government, which backs 41. Also in 2005, the state's 65 state representatives accepted \$102,333 in gifts, or more than \$1,570 apiece. Gov. Bill Owens, the most lavishly showered public servant, accepted \$57,102 in gifts.

The gifts include tickets to college and professional sporting events, tickets to entertainment events ranging from Elton John to "The Phantom of the Opera," ski-lift tickets and resort lodging, whitewater rafting trips and even an IBM Pocket PC.

Then there was travel: more than \$35,000 in travel was given to lawmakers in junkets to Israel, Prague, China, Vancouver and Ottawa, Canada. Recall that the recipients are state legislators.

Such gifts are not for any old Shmoe. They are bestowed on public officials for a specific purpose: influence. Lobbyists and their employers make strategic investments (gifts) in hopes of a favorable outcome (legislation).

Lobbying is big business, bigger in Colorado than elsewhere. Lobbyists in Colorado have been paid \$170 million in the last decade to influence state legislation. The pharmaceutical industry alone spent \$475,000 on Colorado lobbyists in 2003-04.

Colorado has the fourth-highest ratio of lobbyists per legislator — 11 per legislator, compared with 5 per pol in the average state. As Coloradans for Clean Government notes, Colorado has more registered lobbyists than does California, whose population is almost eight times larger.

This concentration of lobbyists might reflect the scarcity of rules here. Colorado places no limits on lobbyists' gifts to public officials. Twenty six other states, including California, limit or completely ban gifts from lobbyists.

Amendment 41 would also prohibit those holding statewide elected office from becoming paid lobbyists in Colorado within two years of leaving office. This "revolving door" provision would shield lawmakers from undue influence from prospective employers. That would help to ensure that legislative votes are based, as much as possible, on the interests of constituents.

It is true, as detractors note, that Amendment 41 does not confine itself to legislative rectitude. It also applies to a host of rank-and-file government officials. This fact opens the door to the spooky rhetoric about illegal scholarships and banned aid to injured firefighters.

But Amendment 41 explicitly excludes such fantastical results. The measure would ban only "an effort to realize personal financial gain through public office." If your kid wins a scholarship based on her brains or need, fine. If a charity supports an injured firefighter, terrific.

But what about a restaurateur who sends theater tickets to the local health inspector? That would be banned, as it should be. An independent, bipartisan ethics commission would consider complaints and could dismiss frivolous complaints (about, say, scholarships) without a hearing.

The opponents of Amendment 41 talk a scary line. But ethics laws and ordinances are usually preceded by such sky-is-falling piffle. We can only guess what motivates the opponents. But we can examine the facts behind the screen of their words.

Amendment 41 should alarm only those who find cleaner government frightening. For the rest of us, it's a good idea.