



WEEKLY REPORT

State Senator Gary Nodler
District 32



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Illuminating the Money Trail

JEFFERSON CITY— For state lawmakers to be truly successful, their constituents have to trust them. To earn that trust, legislators must assure those who elected them that their motivations are based on their districts' needs, not on the monetary contributions of interest groups. Most politicians have nothing to be ashamed about when it comes to who contributes what to their campaigns. The members of the Senate play by the rules of campaign finance, but we're changing those rules to further substantiate that claim for the public.

Senate Bill 1254, which I am co-sponsoring, is considered to be the most significant reform for the Missouri system of campaign-finance ethics. Under the legislation, we will bring accountability and transparency to the campaign-contribution process so the public can easily follow the trail of campaign money.

In the fast-paced environment of politics, there is a fine line between what is ethical to accept and when it is ethical to accept the contributions. The measure draws a more definitive line by prohibiting lawmakers, their families and legislative staff from accepting paid travel, lodging or entertainment expenditures unless the disbursement was approved by a legislative committee. We have also included in this measure a provision blocking campaign fundraising during the legislative session, which runs from January to May. This move will erase the misconceived perception that campaign contributions affect the progress of pending bills.

During non-election years, public officials will still have to file campaign-finance reports quarterly, but during election years, they must file monthly. During the last weeks before election, a report must be filed every 24 hours. This is critical in improving the accountability of elected officials. Campaign-finance reports would also have to be filed electronically, which will enable the public to more easily access the reports on the Missouri Ethics Commission's Web site.

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An amendment to the bill eliminates limits on individual campaign contributions, which currently cannot exceed \$325 for a House candidate, \$650 for a Senate candidate and \$1,275 for someone running for statewide office. The original purpose of these ceilings has been negated by the ability of individual donors to instead pump unlimited amounts of money into political party committees, which can give candidates 10 times the individual-donor maximum.

Because these kinds of contributions have essentially been lawfully laundered, the public is unaware of the money source. Removing the limits on what individuals and interest groups can give will let the public see how much money is going to each candidate and from whom the money is coming.

Two additional amendments to the legislation will strengthen the caliber of morality among elected officials. One disallows convicted felons from running for public office, and the other bars those who are delinquent on their taxes from political candidacy. These provisions make sense because those who are elected to represent the public should not behave in ways that defy the very essence of the state government they serve.

Political campaigns should be conducted appropriately, responsibly and ethically to reflect the integrity of the candidate. This legislation, which is now being considered in the House, is all about bringing transparency and simplicity to a complex system. Constituents should be able to easily determine whether those they voted for are acting in the best interests of Missouri. And thanks to this week's thorough debate and bipartisan efforts, what started out as a good bill resulted in an even better bill, and with it, we can strengthen the public's trust in state government.

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*Senator Gary Nodler represents the people of Newton,
Jasper and Dade counties in the Missouri Senate.*