

Show Me the Money by Dan Jacoby

City Council members who have been looking to run for higher office have a money squeeze. It has nothing to do with the economic meltdown (well, sort of). The money squeeze would be a consequence of extending term limits.

How does this work?

Under the city's campaign finance rules, if a candidate wants to get matching funds, the candidate must agree to limit spending. The limits are different for different positions; running for mayor is far more expensive than running for a council seat. The problem is that some supposedly term-limited people (Speaker Christine Quinn, for instance) have been planning to run for higher office, and have already exceeded what their spending limits would be if they decide to run for their old office again next year.

There's really no problem. These people can simply refuse matching funds, and all is well. Of course, any opponent would get extra matching funds, and would have their spending limits lifted, so the incumbents would lose a lot of advantages that their huge campaign war chests would normally give them.

Apparently, however, as soon as the Council approves extending their own term limits, they'll move to change campaign finance laws so that they can pretend that all the money they've already spent doesn't count. That way, they'll be able to lock in their advantages.

If this sounds like an ultimately self-serving, dictatorial method of ruling, it isn't ... quite. It is reminiscent, however, of the days of Boss Tweed.

Clearly, there are serious problems with the current campaign finance system. In 2005, at least four City Council members running for reelection raised over half a million dollars each, in just two years. They didn't spend most of that money; it was intended to fund their 2009 race. Too many of our elected "representatives" are spending most of their time raising money instead of representing their constituents. And because they are raising money, they are making – and keeping – promises to large donors and fundraisers, promises that are not in the best interest of the city.

Now, it appears that even the current campaign finance laws aren't lax enough for the big spenders. If term limits are extended by the City Council, the next step will be for the people behind the extension to gut the campaign finance laws we have, not in order to replace them with something good, but merely to give themselves even more power.