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OUR VIEW

Some simple steps to cleaner elections

Any day now, the New Mexico Legislature might get a chance — yes, again — to enact some political-ethics reform. Session in and session out, the subject comes up — only to be blocked for the benefit of our state's hidden ownership.

Yet sometimes there are hopeful signs of recognition from the Roundhouse that its image needs polish; that a few sensible rules of behavior need writing.

Last year, the House of Representatives passed a bill banning campaign contributions from lobbyists and contractors; a small step toward restoring elected officials' credibility. But the action came only after eight separate hearings; there wasn't enough time left in the 30-day session for it to clear the Senate.

So the non-partisan public-policy people at Think New Mexico are trying again. The group is seeking sponsors for a bill that would take the taint out of our state's contracting process, raise public respect for lobbying — which doesn't have to be the sleazy practice that it too often is — and, for good measure, shed some light on the backroom forces behind political activism for good or evil.

That last point would be addressed by requiring non-profit groups that engage in political activity during an election year to say who their contributors are. The U.S. Supreme Court has made that really important with its ruling last year that corporate and big-labor support of campaigns is a free-speech right that can't be limited.

That decision has opened the floodgates of influence-buying — but the good part of it is that laws demanding disclosure of who's behind what political-ad campaign would be allowed, even encouraged.

So in other words, throw all the money you want at a candidate or cause; it's your right as an American citizen, individual, corporate or union. But it's a right that should come with rules allowing voters to know who's behind the campaign — and the often-bogus, amazingly effective advertising to carry it out.

Congress is still wrangling over disclosure rules. But New Mexico, where the courts upheld a nonprofit corporation's insistence on secrecy toward backers of a successful effort to defeat three Albuquerque legislators, has a clear chance to shine light on campaign-money supplies.

The disclosure part of Think's bill should have strong support from both parties and all legislative factions. So, too, should the part outlawing contributions from those who so obviously stand to benefit from those contributions.

Some contractors for too long have considered campaign donations part of the cost of doing business: Hand over enough money to the right candidate, then get bundles more back when the state awards contracts. Those contracts should be awarded on the bid and the ability to complete a good job — not on whose campaign you contributed to.

B-b-but that's what actually happens, comes the predictable response; we've got rules against favoritism. Indeed; rules readily gotten around. Reputable contractors should love being free of the pay-to-play morass.

Same for lobbyists: The honest ones would be free of today's suspicions about how they influence legislation and other public decisionmaking.

Approval of these contribution bans and transparency rules is more than mere political honesty; it's an excellent public-relations measure our legislators can use when next year's elections roll around.

We note with delight that our region's congressman, Ben Ray Luján, won't accept campaign contributions from lobbyists. His example at the federal level should have state legislators scurrying to sponsor this overdue reform.