

The Keene & Sentinel

OPINION PAGE

Edited by Guy MacMillin

Keene, New Hampshire

Established in 1799

Editorial**Ethics challenge**

Merrimack lawyer Nancy Richards-Stower is running for Bernard A. Streeter Jr.'s seat on the New Hampshire Executive Council again this year. We call it Streeter's seat because, with the exception of one two-year period a decade ago when he was bumped by Judd Gregg, Streeter has occupied it into the misty past. The district he represents runs from Winchester through Keene along the southern part of the state to Nashua.

The Executive Council is one of the most important, and lesser known, bodies in state government. It passes on all gubernatorial appointments and state contracts. The five-person board has make-or-break control over hundreds of millions of tax dollars and countless careers in and out of government.

Despite their enormous power, council members are paid only \$9,014.98 a year plus between \$3,600 and \$5,400 in expenses, depending on the size of the district. But they sure get wonderful perks. They are allowed to collect as much money as they please for their own personal use by shaking down the very people and the institutions whose livelihoods depend on their votes. The councilors call the practice "fund-raising." It looks more like institutionalized corruption.

Some councilors hold testimonials for themselves, inviting people who need council approval for various projects. From time to time, the entire council puts on a \$100-a-plate fund-raising dinner. Inevitably, the "guest" list includes contractors who do business with the state, lawyers whose clients do business with the state, officials of the university system that depends on state funds, developers who need state approval for projects, lobbyists who depend directly on state decisions, the heads of social-service agencies that need state funds, and people who are, or might someday be, in line for state jobs.

All New Hampshire law requires it that the councilors report their campaign contributions, other gifts and testimonial booty to the secretary of state's office.

As she did two years ago, Richards-Stower is running on the issue of ethics. She kicked off her campaign the other day by taking this oath, which she challenges the other candidates to take:

"1. An executive councilor shall not solicit any campaign contributions from any state employee whose job depends on Executive Council vote or a spouse of any such state employee.

"2. An executive councilor will abstain from voting for any gubernatorial nominee who has contributed to the councilor's political campaign for Executive Council, or whose spouse has so contributed.

"3. Any candidate for Executive Council shall abide (by) this ethics code."

No one knows if New Hampshire's government would be run more efficiently or less expensively if one of the state's top decision-making bodies was not compromised by conflicts of interest. But we suspect those \$9,000 executive councilors are no bargain for taxpayers. In government as in private enterprise, you get what you pay for, and these people are being paid by those who receive tax money, not by those who pay the taxes. Any councilor or candidate for the council who would like to contest that conclusion might start by taking Richard-Stower's pledge.

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Editorial**Council spoilsport**

Nancy Richards-Stower kicked off her New Hampshire Executive Council campaign a few weeks ago by challenging current councilors and other candidates to stop taking gifts and other payments from the businesses and individuals whose livelihoods depend on council action.

The Merrimack attorney is running for the District 5 seat currently held by Bernard A. Streeter, Jr.

Her suggestion met with precious little enthusiasm, so she's now suggesting the Legislature enact a law dealing with conflicts of interest on the council.

"One method to screen out such fund-raising," she writes, "is to require each business or group whose contract needs council approval to disclose whether any of its officers, directors or partners contributed to any council campaign...then require that councilor to abstain from that vote."

Such a law, if applied immediately, would probably put the council out of business for a while. There wouldn't be a quorum for anything. But eventually the law would reduce the number of contributions, making it more difficult for the part-time councilors to supplement their \$9,000 salaries using money extorted from people who need state approval for various reasons.

No doubt about it, Richards-Stower is determined to take all the fun out of serving on the Executive Council.

Council ethics

The 5th District New Hampshire Executive Council race between attorney Nancy Richards-Stower of Merrimack and incumbent councilor Bernard Streeter Jr. of Nashua is turning into a rerun of the 1988 campaign.

In that race, Richards-Stower, a political newcomer, got 40 percent of the vote in a campaign based on criticism of the executive councilors' fund-raising practices.

The council must vote on confirming all gubernatorial appointments and pass on all state contracts over \$5,000. And Streeter, along with other councilors, routinely solicits money from people whose personal careers or companies' livelihoods depend on Executive Council approval. The practice is legal in New Hampshire.

Richards-Stower has taken a pledge that she won't accept contributions from anyone who does business with the state, and she's challenging Streeter to do the same. But he refuses, and he appears to be furious over the implication that there's something wrong with the way executive councilors raise money (which, incidentally, can be spent on their political campaigns, or on anything else they desire). Streeter says people who give him money do so only because they're interested in good government.

Yet, when you imagine a similar situation in almost any other profession, the conflict of interest seems stark. Imagine, for example, a judge sending out fund-raising letters to criminal defendants scheduled to appear in his court, and then contending that those who agreed to donate money were interested only in the impartial administration of justice. Maybe the judge could separate his judicial duties from his bank statements, but the dealings would certainly weaken public confidence in the courts.

In 1988, Streeter was so angry at Richards-Stower's criticism that he threatened to sue her. The other day, in a televised debate in Nashua, he was asked why he made the threat and why he didn't follow through with it. Here is his answer, followed by Richards-Stower's reply:

Streeter: "It hurt me deeply. It was the first election that I've ever been involved in where there was such negative campaigning — the inference that I accepted campaign contributions and peddled jobs, which is utterly absurd. And, frankly, I was very upset about it." And I did have an attorney look into it. I think we might have had a pretty good case. But I won the election and it was a moot point. But I think it pointed out that this negative kind of campaigning even gets down to the level of the Executive Council, and I refuse to engage in that kind of activity."

Richards-Stower: "Let me just jump in. That same attorney who gave him advice later gave him a \$300 contribution and was the first person that Bernie had appointed to a judgeship in New Hampshire after his re-election."

Ouch.

FOR
NANCY
Richards-Stower

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