

Posted on Fri, Feb. 17, 2012

## **Breathtakingly bad approach to oversight**

How on earth could anybody possibly think this is a good idea?

At least one member of our local delegation certainly doesn't, and kudos to her. Let's hope she and like-minded lawmakers can talk some sense into enough of their colleagues.

The idea -- and we are not making this up -- comes in the form of a Georgia House bill that would allow employees of the state Department of Natural Resources to solicit money from private individuals and interests. Those employees could include top DNR officials, and the interests could include interests regulated by DNR.

No doubt people pushing such nonsense will argue, if they haven't already, that mere "disclosure" is an adequate safeguard -- as though knowing who buys regulatory favor, and for how much, sufficiently serves the public interest. That has become an all too familiar line of political reasoning in Georgia in recent years.

Rep. Debbie Buckner, D-Junction City, isn't buying a word of it: "We don't want a quid pro quo," Buckner told The Georgia Report's Tom Crawford, "where someone says, 'I'll give you this now and I'll be asking for a permit later.'"

No kidding.

Chief sponsor of HB 887 is Rep. Chad Nimmer, R-Blackshear, who says the bill's purpose is to raise money for an agency whose budget and work force have been cut drastically in recent years. He also notes, rightly, that there is already a DNR foundation that can accept corporate donations -- a fact of which millions of Georgians have likely been blissfully unaware, and which probably wouldn't strike many as a very good idea either.

With all due respect to the responsible and hard-working employees who no doubt constitute the vast majority of DNR's work force: Things, as the saying goes, are tough all over. Few if any Georgia agencies have escaped the heavy budget axe, including regulatory agencies like DNR.

That such offices, charged with safeguarding the public interest, can accept money from people and industries they regulate is already inappropriate enough; the idea of them actively soliciting such money is beyond absurd.

Concern about Nimmer's legislation, we're pleased to note, crosses party lines. Rep. Chuck Williams, R-Watkinsville, noted that among employees of DNR, which oversees state park and wildlife management areas, are armed law enforcement officials.

“I’m a little uneasy,” Williams said, with what might have been wry understatement, “about DNR employees, some of whom carry firearms and have a ticket book, asking for donations.” Rep. Judy Manning, R-Marietta, said Georgia shouldn’t “start a state employees’ kettle brigade.”

It’s a principle of public service: The appearance of conflict of interest is as serious a threat to public trust as an actual one. In this case, the distinction is worse than moot; it’s nonexistent.

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