

COLUMN

Ian Lind: The Sound Of Money Talking

Getting big money out of politics seems to be a necessary first step toward a stronger democracy.

ABOUT 8 HOURS AGO • By Ian Lind 

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There's a lot of cynicism about money's undue influence on politics, from the presidential level with its billionaire-funded super PACs right on down through to the donor base at the local level. And much of the cynicism is richly deserved.

I was reminded of that when a friend called me last week about what he viewed as a power play by the Honolulu City Council. Here's a short version of the story.

The end of August was blending into the beginning of September. The long Labor Day weekend was rapidly approaching, and Honolulu residents were watching the weather while preparing their holiday plans. Hurricane Madeline was nearing the Big Island, but all eyes were on the next storm, Hurricane Lester, which was strengthening into a Category 4 cyclone and heading directly at the state.



Canoes rest along the bank of Haseko's lagoon.

And while residents were preoccupied with preparations for either a long holiday weekend or a close encounter with a tropical hurricane, the chairman of the Honolulu City Council's [Committee on Zoning and Planning](#) filed a notice of a special meeting to be held bright and early at 9 a.m. on the morning after the Labor Day holiday.

The special meeting, which had not been on the council's calendar that lays out its schedule for the year, was being held to consider just three measures on a single topic — the Haseko development once known as the Ewa Marina, now re-packaged into a residential-resort project known as Hakalei.

Haseko's project has a long history going back into the 1980s. It has [raised controversy several times](#), most recently when a group of homeowners who bought into earlier phases of the project objected to the elimination of the marina, the development's original centerpiece. Haseko had proposed dropping the marina in favor of a simple lagoon which, the company said, would save both money and time. The owners [accused Haseko of a classic "bait and](#)

switch,” for years promising home buyers a world-class marina as an amenity, and instead now planning to deliver an algae-infested swimming area.

S Passage of the three current measures would cut the company loose from earlier development plans and allow it to proceed in new directions.

Peeking
Developer's PR

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— a Real
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As word of the special meeting spread among critics of the company, it was seen as nothing more than a blatant, special interest move designed to benefit the developer at the expense of the public. One person wrote to council chair Ernie Martin, saying the meeting looked like “a cram-through attempt by the city council.”

Which sets the stage for the phone call from my friend. He’s no neophyte, but concerns about the council’s sudden haste to placate Haseko had, for the first time, propelled him to examine the campaign contributions received by zoning committee chair Trevor Ozawa and other members of the City Council.

My friend was ballistic when he called, still reeling from looking at the numbers and realizing that members of the council are almost wholly dependent on funding from development interests.

“I can’t believe it’s so blatant,” he lamented. He ran down the list, again and again finding contributors to Ozawa and other council members with ties to the Haseko project.

I don’t know what was actually behind the decision to push these bills at this time, and what other political influences were at work. But it wasn’t unreasonable for my friend, and others, to look at the sources of campaign money and see it as the key factor in driving public policy towards this and other developments.

Does Campaign Cash Influence City Council Members?

It’s not just Ozawa, and not just Haseko. They are just two examples showing that those representing a narrow range of pecuniary interests provide the bulk of money to fund city campaigns. And perhaps that’s understandable. The city is where most of the the public policy decisions are made that allow land and power to translate into private wealth.

And it is blatant. You can easily go to the [Campaign Spending Commission's website](#) and find out who has contributed to council members. There are the developers. There are the architects, engineers and consultants who work for developers, and the unions representing employees who hope to benefit from the jobs promised by developers. There are the realtors, lawyers and bankers who also work for developers. There are the private financiers making bets on particular projects. There are business and professional associations of those involved in real estate development. There are individual officers, employees of all of the above and members of their families.

Campaign contributions are heavily skewed towards the big players. City council candidates have received a total of \$647,674 in campaign contributions of \$100 or more since the beginning of 2016. Of that amount, 84 percent came from contributors who gave at least \$1,000 to council candidates. Less than 2 percent of the total came from those who contributed between \$100 and \$250 to council candidates.



Cory Lum/Civil Beat

Honolulu City Council member Trevor Ozawa chairs the zoning and planning committee.

I'm pretty sure that the breakdown in the mayor's race looks very similar.

No wonder so many average people don't bother to vote. After all, they can look at these contributions and quite reasonably assume that their interests can't compete for the attention of their elected officials. Money talks, we all know. Yes, it leads to cynicism, but not unreasonably so.

I really don't know if somehow cutting the link between special interest money and political campaigns would lead to opening up the political process and triggering broader reforms. After all, money isn't the only form of influence. But while decoupling politics from big money may not be enough to reinvigorate and renew our democracy, it certainly seems a necessary first step.

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About the Author



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Ian Lind is an award-winning investigative reporter and columnist who has been blogging daily for 15 years. He has also worked as a newsletter publisher, public interest advocate and lobbyist for Common Cause in Hawaii, peace educator, and legislative staffer. Lind is a lifelong resident of the islands. [Read his blog here.](#)

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Richard Iaconetti

3 hours ago

The link between corporate money and political leverage in America is the biggest problem with a laughable and dysfunctional election system. Cap campaign spending, create an even playing field, create a board of examiner's to qualify candidates before they can even run for any office.

**Noelani Wilcox***2 hours ago*

Very disappointing, and not unexpected. For organizations that are funded and tasked with voter registration, please begin with giving people a reason to vote by cleaning up the sewage in campaign funding. Otherwise, voting is less of a choice for the people by the people. Mass advertisements by special interests (OVERdevelopers, uppity unions, realtors, bankers, etc.) are the influencers of "democracy".

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**PNW Mike***16 minutes ago*

Well, I suppose we could restrict political donations, by limiting it to, say, \$200 per registered voter. Of course, to make it trackable, each voter has to have a unique ID number, like a SSN.

Additionally, to make up the bulk of the campaign funds, each taxpayer gets hit with an income tax surcharge, say .5%, the proceeds of which are deposited into a separate fund, independently managed. It can be a non-government-run trust fund. This would be a requirement with no opt out by political candidates.

There would be details to work out, but it would greatly reduce the special interest monetary influence.

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