

We shouldn't foot ALEC bill

You've probably heard that in late April, the South Dakota Legislature's Republican-controlled Executive Board approved a measure for the state treasury to cover legislators' membership fees to the American Legislative Exchange Council.

The board decided the state treasury should pay for the \$100, two-year memberships for all 105 South Dakota lawmakers and for unlimited out-of-state trips to ALEC meetings by legislators who are members of ALEC committees.

What could be wrong with South Dakota taxpayers footing the bill for legislators' membership and travel to ALEC meetings?

Especially when you consider that in December 2011, ALEC adopted model legislation, based on a Texas law, addressing the public disclosure of chemicals in drilling fluids used to extract natural gas through hydraulic fracturing, or fracking. The ALEC legislation, which has since provided the basis for similar bills submitted in five states, has been promoted as a victory for consumers' right to know about potential drinking water contaminants.

So, hooray for us taxpayers. Right?

A close reading of the bill, however, reveals loopholes that would allow energy companies to withhold the names of certain fluid contents, for reasons including that they have been deemed trade secrets. Most telling, perhaps, the bill was sponsored within ALEC by ExxonMobil, one of the largest practitioners of fracking — something not explained when ALEC lawmakers introduced their bills back home.

Hmmmm. ALEC is described by neutral observers as a "business-backed group," and has a membership that includes not only corporations, but nearly 2,000 state legislators across the country.

The *New York Times* wrote a year ago about ALEC's role in creating model bills, drafted by lobbyists and lawmakers, that broadly advance a pro-business, socially conservative agenda. Which would be fine, we suppose, if the organization stopped there.

The newspaper, however, notes that a review of internal ALEC documents shows that drafting legislation is only one facet of a sophisticated operation for shaping public policy at a state-by-state level. The records offer a glimpse of how special interests effectively turn ALEC's lawmaker members into stealth lobbyists, providing them with talking points, signaling how they should vote and collaborating on bills affecting hundreds of issues like school vouchers and tobacco taxes.

"I would look at it as education, education, education," Sen. Deb Peters, R-Hartford, South Dakota state chairwoman for ALEC, told local media recently when defending the decision to use taxpayer dollars to pay lawmakers' ALEC dues. "Our legislators will get better the more they get to interact with other legislators (from other states)."

Peters makes it sound like ALEC throws big, happy, friendly meetings and conventions where lawmakers from all states and all political stripes are welcome.

Rep. Bernie Hunhoff, a Democrat from Yankton, who serves as House minority leader, seems to indicate that isn't so.

"Clearly, they're a very pro-large corporation advocacy group," said Hunhoff, in a recent *Sioux Falls Argus Leader* story. "They have a right to exist. The problem is taxpayer dollars shouldn't be supporting that."

The effectiveness of ALEC's bill-production system is a major part of the group's appeal to businesses, according to

New York Times report. A 2011 membership brochure boasted that ALEC lawmakers typically introduced more than 1,000 bills based on model legislation each year and passed about 17 percent of them.

The dues we South Dakota taxpayers will be paying so that our lawmakers can be educated at ALEC meetings is a drop in the bucket of the organization's operating budget.

BETWEEN THE LINES



DAVID LIAS
david.lias@plaintalk.net

ALEC is primarily financed by more than 200 private-sector members, whose annual dues of \$7,000 to \$25,000 accounted for most of its \$7 million

budget in 2010.

Some companies give much more to ALEC, all of it tax deductible: AT&T, Pfizer and Reynolds American each contributed \$130,000 to \$398,000, according to a copy of ALEC's 2010 tax returns, obtained by *The Times*, that included donors' names, which are normally withheld from public inspection. The returns show that corporate members pay stipends — it calls them "scholarships" — for lawmakers to travel to annual conferences, including a four-day retreat where ALEC spends as much as \$250,000 on child care for members' families.

At the conferences, internal records show, representatives of corporations sit with legislators on eight task forces dealing with issues like telecommunications, health care and product liability. The task forces develop model bills that legislators then introduce in their home states.

Beyond creating model bills, ALEC keeps careful track of state legislation, as well as national issues, and tries to mobilize its lawmaker members to take action. Aides on ALEC task forces keep detailed, color-coded spreadsheets on "good bills" and "problematic bills" in all 50 states, and they regularly send e-mails to alert legislators about ones that ALEC opposes or supports.

Lisa Graves, the executive director of the Center for Media and Democracy, which teamed up with *The Nation* magazine to publicize a cache of 800 ALEC model bills last year, said that as of August 2011, all but one of 104 leadership positions within the organization were filled by Republicans and that the policies ALEC promoted were almost uniformly conservative.

"They talk a good game about being bipartisan," Ms. Graves said, "but the record shows the opposite."

If Deb Peters and other South Dakota Republican lawmakers want to receive an education from ALEC, that's fine. But Peters and her GOP cohorts should bear the expense of such lobbying, or training sessions themselves.

Hunhoff notes that ALEC has a right to exist, and we agree they have a right to lobby and influence. We just think it would be more proper for ALEC reps to come to Pierre to do their lobbying, following state regulations for such activity.

The fact that ALEC is a conservative organization and South Dakota is a conservative state doesn't justify it. South Dakota lawmakers are accountable to constituents — or at least are supposed to be. Taxpayers shouldn't be asked to pay up front to give such a highly partisan group as ALEC even more opportunity to exert its stealthy influence over our state Legislature.



Farm dump: My sinful excavation

"Born from the land owner's natural instinct to protect his fields from soil erosion...farmers had to dump their broken junk and rubbish somewhere." From Dump Diggers Blog Spot

At first glance, this benign assemblage settled below the edge of a cornfield appears quite innocent. Arms of twisted, rusted iron spiral hither and yonder. Once loose remnants of broken glass, bottles, jars; pieces of white porcelain form a grotesquely quaint sculpture protruding from thawing clumps of chocolatey compost and peeking through overgrown clumps of tall grasses, poison oak and mulberry trees.

This spot, a farm dump cascading onto a public park, is hardly noticeable, unless one should stop and study it.

I haven't gone so far as to bring a rack or any tools to unearth this old trash hill; although, I am tempted to do so.

Instead, with the soles of my shoes or a sturdy branch, I lightly nudge broken bricks, cracked barrels and gnarled bed frames in a reverent attempt to resurrect pots and plates and pickle jars.

Once started on this path of discovery, I have difficulty stopping. So, it is with intrigue and a hefty dose of romance I fall victim to wonder over what I may find next: shards of green depression glassware, greatly dulled now, the base of what looks like a Mayer China coffee cup — tan with the trademark brown stripe around the outside and manufacturer's stamp barely legible on the bottom.

I locate liquor bottles submerged under a half-foot of brush and bramble with only their necks visible. Caked and soiled by nature's

MY STORY YOUR STORY



PAULA DAMON
paula.damon@iw.net

wear and tear, some are brown glass while others once clear are now frosted by time.

With arrested excitement, I nervously venture further on this embankment. Ever at the command of overbearing curiosity, my antsy desire penetrates deeper into the burn pile. Spoils belonging to someone I fail to put a face to, save a worn-torn forehead overshadowing sun-baked cheeks that wrinkle down around a sullen mouth. And those eyes, despite dismal forecasts on futures, yields and weather, are forever faithful to the farm.

Visibly self-conscious of my probing, I nervously look over my shoulder to ensure that I am alone. I wait a moment in sudden stillness to listen for murmuring voices of hikers heading down the same path that led me to this ravine of hidden secrets. Halting my excavation, a brief interruption more like an eternity, I try to detect rustling leaves or grinding bike tires on loose limestone.

Even though I am on public property, the guilty pleasure welling inside me confesses I am treading on interior lives privately cast away, perhaps with bravado or shame, over the side of the field into this God-forsaken and forgotten burial mound.

Oddly covetous, I want this spot, some 20-square feet or so of brokenness discarded by

generations, all to myself.

My thoughts race in hushed tones while uncovering physical evidence, sacred and useless legacies of farm families who lived and died on the other edge of those crop rows, which now are casting dusty furrowed brows over my compulsive rooting.

I am the newly adopted keeper of moored bed frames and charred porcelain potties squinting through infant scrub pines. I am the self-ordained minister of tangled barbed wire and broken Ball jars. I am the watchful custodian of melted metal lids and twisted cooking pots. I am the freshly minted curator of Wisconsin Premium Beer cans and angle iron.

I am the triumphant groundskeeper of this graceless resting place to which thousands of matches were struck in hopes of destroying all evidence of celebrating arrivals, mourning partings.

After a half-hour or so, my exuberant hunt takes its toll. I tire quickly. Suddenly, my initial digging with customary ancient wonder turns to brooding. My inaugural festive pride sours.

My once strident searching becomes grief, as I slowly step back away from this cemetery heap. Taking with me weary woes of these remnants of making and changing beds, birthing and swaddling babies, preparing and serving meals, blessing and breaking vows, soothing and drowning heartaches, dressing and undressing dreams — Model T headlight, glass Heinz ketchup jar and all.

I am a trespasser on this farm dump, sinfully trudging on holy ground.

SOUTH DAKOTA EDITORIAL ROUNDUP

Argus Leader, Sioux Falls, April 20, 2013

City kept its cool during storm

With streets, sidewalks, roofs and yards getting cleared of branches of all size, Sioux Falls is starting to look like itself again.

Sure, there will be gaping holes previously filled by ancient and shade trees that have provided shade and a splash of fall color. Things changed in the April ice storm of 2013.

But just like any natural disaster, the storm brought out the good in so many people with neighbors and strangers pitching in, too. At the same time, our city's response system worked efficiently and professionally, keeping residents informed of how cleanup and the restoration of power was going. That's the way you hope it will work out when you prepare for a worst-case-scenario situation.

City department heads, including director of public works Mark Cotter, were calm during the storm and presented orderly, sound plans to temporarily shut down streets and start clearing tree limbs and restoring power. Fire Chief Jim Sideras offered timely advice, throwing in just a little wit to remind us that even when things seem bad, it's OK to smile. The two, along with Police Chief Doug Barthel, were unflappable and showed leadership in a time when the city needed it.

They, along with Mayor Mike Huether, held regular public briefings so that people in Sioux Falls could stay informed. We like

the attitude City Hall brought to the people by telling folks it was acceptable if sidewalks didn't get cleared as soon as they should. We appreciated the approach that it was fine if the city needed to come back more than once to get branches.

The city kept us calm.

Granted, the city spent and still is spending a great deal of money to help return Sioux Falls to normal, but it is doing so in an organized way that is making a difference. It's easy to complain about a bureaucracy, but when you need it, look at what it can do.

In addition, companies that provide power in Sioux Falls and the outlying area worked hard to bring power back on for tens of thousands of homes. While it undoubtedly became more frustrating for residents the longer the power was out, those workers — many coming from other states to help — were appreciated. Given the amount of damage, they accomplished a lot in those first days after the storm and took the time to show kindness to people who had lived without heat and lights.

We'd like to think the way the late spring ice storm was handled would be the way it would work in any natural disaster. Yes, the look of our community has been altered. But the people have shown how much they care and how neighborly they can be. That really hasn't changed. We hope it never does.

The Daily Republic, Mitchell, April 20, 2013

SD college costs keep climbing

The good news is that college graduates earn more money over their lifetimes with a degree than high school graduates without a college diploma. The bad news is the cost of getting that university degree keeps climbing.

The Board of Regents approved tuition increases at the state's six public universities of an average of 4.4 percent.

At South Dakota School of Mines & Technology, the annual tuition and fees will increase 7 percent to \$9,083, and at Black Hills State University, tuition and fees will go up 4.1 percent to \$7,617.

The tuition increases will cover inflation and salary increases approved by the Legislature.

Regents President Kathryn Johnson said increasing costs in the university system necessitated the change. "Our priority remains the affordability of a quality college education for our students," Johnson said in a prepared statement.

The rising cost of a college education is not a South Dakota phenomenon; college tuition is increasing everywhere.

In the past 10 years, the average in-state tuition and fees at South Dakota's four-year institutions have risen from \$4,449 in 2002-2003 to \$6,655 in 2011-2012, an increase of 49.6 percent.

The average tuition increase nationally is 40.3 percent, according to the U.S. Department of Education.

Meanwhile, the inflation rate since 2003 has been 26.2 percent.

With tuition costs increasing at almost double the inflation rate, no wonder a college education is becoming less affordable.

Still, a college degree from a South Dakota university remains a better bargain than in most states. According to CNNMoney.com, the average in-state tuition nationally is \$8,665 per year, or about \$2,000 higher than in South Dakota.

It is no less true in South Dakota as in other states that attending a college in your home state is cheaper than going to school in another state and paying out-of-state tuition.

However, South Dakota is second in the nation with 76 percent of its students graduating from college with student loan debt — an average of \$24,200. Coupled with high interest rates on federal student loans — that are set by Congress — students are immediately met with mounting financial stress.

Full-time enrollment at the state's universities dropped this year by 0.94 percent, only the second time since 1999 that enrollment has fallen. It's too soon to know if university enrollment has peaked, but the steady increase in the cost of a college education eventually will force more high school graduates to look for lower-cost career choices.

We appreciate the Board of Regents' efforts to hold down student costs while providing access to a quality education, but the trend toward higher college education costs doesn't appear to be slowing down.

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Vermillion Plain Talk Staff

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