

Holinger: Potential conflicts of interest

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I just don't get that Occupy Wall Street crowd getting down on the mega-rich, that 1 percent of Americans that owns 40 percent of our wealth. Who else can afford four-car garages, three Springer Spaniels, two weekend chalets and a garden rivaling Versailles?

I worry about them, too. What if Occupy Wall Street succeeds in exposing the market's income imbalance and resets the scales? How will CEOs and corporate lawyers afford their ranch of legal advisors lassoing every tax loophole?

I figure at least two 1-percenters live in the Fox Valley, those philanthropists who each gave about a half million dollars to Geneva for a plastic 100-yard playground.

Nice gesture. But with District 304 schools buried under a debt that is mounting up to \$325.6 million, that's like the rich uncle giving an Xbox to his nephew who is living in a house with a leaky roof.

Hey, maybe those 1-percenters will chat up their fellow country club foursomes to each throw in \$100,000 to help pay off those top-of-the-line new buildings and state-of-the-art everything else!

But that wouldn't be right. After all, we – the majority of middle-class taxpayers – voted for those referenda, including the approximately \$80 million extravaganza in 2007.

Well, OK, that was with a lot of urging by the Geneva Citizens for Excellent Schools, a political action committee pushing to get referenda passed by using signage, mailings, etc.

What gives? Since 2004, the Illinois State Board of Elections site lists contributions to the Geneva Citizens for Excellent Schools from William Blair & Co. (\$3,950); FGM Architects, Whitt Law Firm, Foxford LLC (\$3,000 each); PMA Financial Network and Hutchinson Schocket Erley & Co. (\$2,000 each), all district vendors whose financial interests lay in the referenda passing.

In the past, smaller donations to the Geneva Citizens for Excellent Schools have been made by past and present school board members, as well as the Geneva teachers' union (\$295), who, if you think about it, might profit personally, politically or economically with a referendum's favorable outcome.

At Geneva's school board meeting last Monday night, board President Tim Moran was asked if there was a conflict of interest for a board member or District 304 vendor to contribute to a political action committee whose objective was passing school referenda. After some hesitation, he answered it was OK if the person or company came to terms with the contribution being separate from his board work or district work, respectively.

Gee, I sure admire board members and vendors who can do that. We'll just have to take their word that they're continually hard at work mentally separating the two.

Which is especially hard when the Code of Conduct for school board members stipulates, "I will represent all school district constituents honestly and equally and refuse to surrender my responsibilities to special interest or partisan political groups."

And, "I will avoid any conflict of interest or the appearance of impropriety"

Oh, well, with the forever rising taxes in the city of Geneva, of which about 75 percent is determined by the District 304 school board, as well as the steady decline in median income since 2000, I'll see the rest of you 99-percenters at the Occupy Randall Road rally. I'll be the guy outside DSW in the GE Frigidaire box.

No solicitors, please.