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Lemar Pushes For, Against School Budget Cuts

BY Paul Bass | JUN 25, 2010 12:17 PM

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CONTRIBUTED PHOTO

In May, Roland Lemar pushed City Hall to cut schools spending in order to keep taxes down. Thursday, he showed up at a rally to stop City Hall from cutting school spending.

He can explain.

Lemar, an East Rock alderman currently [running for state representative](#), [appeared at a rally](#) (pictured) on behalf of school custodians opposing efforts by the Board of Education to contract out their jobs. City officials claim they may be able to save \$2.2 million a year by contracting out. They also released results of a surprise inspection that they claimed showed custodians watching NBA finals instead of working.

In May, Lemar championed the cause of tax-weary citizen watchdogs who filled city hearings to demand budget cuts. Lemar and fellow East Rock Alderman Justin Elicker [succeeded in pushing the Board of Ed](#) to slash spending \$3 million.

The top organizer of the citizen watchdogs, [Jeffrey Kerekes of NHCAN](#), also showed up at Thursday's protest supporting the unionized city custodians and opposing privatization.

Are they playing both sides of the issue? Lemar and Kerekes were asked that question on Friday. They offered extensive answers.

The Candidate

"No, not at all," Lemar responded to the question.





THOMAS MACMILLAN PHOTO

He noted that in May, when he pushed for the schools spending cut, he also authored an amendment that specifically prevented the city from counting on \$1.5 million in savings from contracting out custodial services. His amendment, which passed, removed language from an otherwise vague "Innovation-Based Budget" plan that counted on that contracting out. (He's pictured at right in photo above, next to co-sponsor Alderman Justin Elicker.)

Lemar said the point was that budget cuts should come first from school administrative positions. That's where the fat is, he said.

He said he bases that view on the fact that school enrollment has dropped while the number of school administrators has risen. The number of New Haven public school students dropped 7 percent from 2005 to 2009, from 20,451 to 19,050, he reported; meanwhile, the number of school administrators grew 12 percent, from 117 to 131.

Which administrative positions should be cut? Lemar said he couldn't identify specific positions.

For years people have complained that the city has too many highly paid school administrators. Neither the Board of Aldermen nor the Board of Education has held hearings or otherwise explored what administrators do and whether over the past 16 years schools could have been run differently.

Lemar was asked why he and his fellow aldermen haven't asked those questions.

"I don't know if it's just faith in the mayor and [Superintendent] Dr. [Reggie] Mayo's outline of what the requirements are from the state level. I think part of it is the recognition when we outline cuts or specific dollar amount reductions, we end up on the back end when the Board of Education says, 'OK we're gonna cut TAG' [the Talented and Gifted program]."

Lemar said that in the past few years he and other aldermen have come to revisit an approach that improving schools has to include spending more money.

"We've all fallen into this trap that dollars equate with success. It's not until the last few years that we've" come to idea that "there are other models," he said.

He added the aldermen have now succeeded in pushing for the city to do more performance-based budgeting, so they can examine how money is spent on a position-by-position level.

Aldermen have often argued that they can't examine the Board of Ed in depth because according to the city charter they can vote only to approve or disapprove the school budget, but can't change individual line items. The Board of Ed, meanwhile, [approved its entire budget this year](#) without a single public or committee hearing and only days after the members first saw it.

Aldermen do have the power to conduct hearings into how any city department spends its budget. In the 1980s the Board of Aldermen held extensive hearings into how the school budget was spent and influenced the final decisions.

The Watchdog





Jeffrey Kerekes (at left in file photo), whose organization has criticized City Hall for wasteful spending and [called for across-the-board 10 percent department budget cuts](#), said he came out to Thursday's custodians rally not because he opposes privatization of city services in general, but because he doesn't trust the DeStefano administration to carry it out.

The custodians' union's slogan is "Privatization Equals Corruption."

Kerekes said he told union members that he doesn't agree with the slogan necessarily and that "the opposite isn't also true," either: "Just because it's public, doesn't mean there isn't corruption."

That's why he does oppose this privatization plan for the custodians, he said. He doesn't have confidence in the mayor "making decisions based on what's best for the city" rather than "based on who knows who." As an example he cited the five years of exclusive contracts that politically connected marshal Peter Criscuolo got from the city to serve tax warrants. Criscuolo lost that gig after [an audit found that he allegedly](#) shook down businesses to [pay bills they didn't even owe](#), or to run up exorbitant fees. Two aldermen, Jorge Perez and Lemar, pushed through a reform that opened up the process for hiring marshals and how they do their jobs. Criscuolo has resumed getting some of that work.

Kerekes was asked about City Hall's response to Thursday's custodian rally, the release of the results of the surprise inspection during which custodians were watching NBA playoff games on TV.

"I think you should fire anybody that was not doing their job," Kerekes said. "That's not what we were at the rally for—to protect people who were not doing their job. Any time you find somebody not doing their job, they should go."

He added that the custodians' union has supported getting rid of workers who deserve to be fired, but run into interference if those workers are politically connected.

"We just don't have confidence in the mayor's ability to save us money," Kerekes said. He added that because the city doesn't currently use performance-based budget, there are no measurements by which to judge whether privatization would actually save money; promised savings failed to materialize with the privatization of the city's trash authority, he said.

"If we had a clear idea of what we'd be saving, we'd be open to discussing" contracting out jobs, he said. "There's no clear measure."

Comments

posted by: Exiled Italian Shill on June 25, 2010 1:19pm

Kerekes and Doyens ... flip-flop on issues as it suits their political agendas. In the past both have bashed union contracts, now they seek to defend them? Get real!

NHCan's commitment as budget watchdogs and their commitment to stop government waste and runaway spending only lasts until the next coalition building activity or press event they can muster or join-in on.

I am all for not paying higher taxes. I understand the need for unions. I just really hate hypocrisy.

posted by: Concerned Citizen on June 25, 2010 1:28pm

There is a great deal of "FAT" in the New Haven Dept. of Education budget; that fat is not in the schools; it is at 54 Meadow Street where several administrators who earn five and six figure pensions and also have contracts to go into schools as consultants. It is an outrage! For a decade the BOE did not make the necessary investment in Urban Youth (hire the numbers of teachers, counsellors, therapists and support staff needed; did not put in place an effective infrastructure, or put the students in uniforms), to make it into a school rather than a dumping ground for those considered hopeless, but they can come up with over a million dollars to pay Domus for a max of 48 kids for the first year!

The Mayor has agreed to having Bill Quinn, the retired NH public health director, come back to serve as a consultant at a reported \$50K per year, while Dr. Asomugha is being paid as the acting health director. Mr. Quinn, who is listed as having a MPH, has no outstanding accomplishment to show for his years as director of health in NH. Asomugha is an MD, MSPH; she is acting director; what do they need Quinn to come in and consult about? This is a corrupt way of padding the pockets of those who politically supported the mayor; it is an acceptable way of ripping off tax payers. Let's take to the street; demand that City Hall clean house of all the waste before raising property taxes. We should spend smartly and generously on education in the schools, not on fat salaries for retirees and those who are retired but remain on the job!

City Hall cannot be trusted; therefore any contract they make with outside groups need to be carefully scrutinized; besides, whatever can be done in house and maintain jobs should be done before it is contracted out to cronies. All employees should be paid according to performance, not according to their connections; unions should support performance-based pay; it is in everyone's best interest. Job pride has gone bye-bye.

posted by: Funky Chicken on June 25, 2010 1:31pm

Lemar - OK I will give him a pass this time but Kerekes (and Doyens in the main story) no way they just hate the Mayor and his staff and will rarely (I never say never) say something positive. NHCAN is a single issue group and they are in conflict with their mission statement.

posted by: streever on June 25, 2010 1:51pm

The headline is a bit misleading: Lemar's position has not changed. He was—and is—for trimming the fat at the top of the Schools, where hiring & spending increases while enrollment decreases.

He never argued for laying off janitors—or teachers.

What type of person thinks the most rational thing to do is lay off a janitor who makes a fraction of the cost we pay to an administrator? The lower level employees have been squeezed & cut and we're still in this mess. Obviously it's time to look at some of the larger spending and less of the small fry.

posted by: streever on June 25, 2010 2:07pm

Also: I agree completely with Kerekes. The mayor does not make decisions based solely on the welfare of this city. While I agree with many of his proposals and specific actions, I will never agree with his decisions on things like hiring Bill O'Brien, Peter Criscuolo, or managing his staff, many of whom behave like barbarians.

Maybe the Mayor just isn't interested in being CEO—maybe he's just a policy wonk—if that's the case, then he should stop meddling and making sure his fundraisers get cushy jobs.

If you work on his governor or mayoral campaigns or raise money, you have a job. That's how he does it. It's not even something he tries to hide, that is how many people are hired. It's not right.

If it happened once, I'd call it a mistake. Because he continues to do it over and over, hiring unqualified or inappropriate people, I can only assume it's an essential character flaw which makes him incapable of being a good mayor.

Run for Senate, run for the House, whatever—if you're a policy wonk, go be a policy wonk. Stop making hiring decisions based on who you rub elbows with at church or fundraisers.

posted by: ignoranceisbliss on June 25, 2010 2:39pm

The problem with Jeffrey Kerekes is a complete absence of consistency in his thinking except for "If Destefano is for it, I'm agin it". He proposes a 10% across the board cut but then resists a legitimate proposal to get rid of a bunch of dead beat unionized city employees who have a long history of not doing their job.

Jeffrey face it.... nothing Destefano does will ever satisfy you, but you can only hide behind opposition to him and his alleged corruption for so long. What would you do? Do you or don't you support privatization? Is this or

is it not a legitimate means of saving the City money and getting the schools cleaned?

... Run for something. Take some responsibility!

Any by the way would you please stop throwing around allegations of corruption...if you want to see what real corruption looks like go talk to Hartford.
