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Being Santa Claus isn't in the Constitution

BY LAWRENCE W. REED

...A wise and frugal government, which shall restrain men from injuring one another, shall leave them otherwise free to regulate their own pursuits of industry and improvement, and shall not take from the mouth of labor the bread it has earned. This is the sum of good government. ... — Thomas Jefferson, First Inaugural Address, March 1801

Oh, what a difference a couple hundred years can make! I wonder what Jefferson would think of the 2,306 earmarks (totaling more than \$2 billion) that Congress approved last year just within spending bills for colleges and universities. According to the Chronicle of Higher Education, those dollars went for pet projects from “research” centers named for sitting members of Congress to a study on odors from swine and poultry.

Lest you think the problem is restricted to Washington, visit www.michiganvotes.org and browse through the 2,500 bills introduced in the full-time Michigan Legislature last year. Mercifully, they didn't all pass, but about a third of them

did — adding hundreds of new laws in one year alone (and almost none were repealed). Somehow I don't feel better governed.

The pattern here isn't pretty. The sad fact is that today, many legislators and lots of



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citizens just don't see government as Jefferson did. It's not an impartial enforcer of peace assigned a few important duties and confined to “the people's business.” No, the business of lawmakers is all too often the dispensing of special breaks and favors to certain persons and entities instead of all people. They also spend a lot of time in frivolous matters, memorializing this or commemorating that, and otherwise cooking up things for government to say or do because it'll make somebody happy somewhere or get their name attached to a law. I call this “government by grab bag.”

Here's a representative sample of recent goodies from the Michigan Legislature's

grab bag:

- House Bill 5866 authorizes tens of millions of dollars in new state debt to subsidize the state's tourism industry. Didn't we just get whacked with a \$1.4 billion tax hike last fall? Are we now going to tax the children of tomorrow for the recreation of today's adults?

- Senate Bill 1208 and House Bill 5904 each prescribe an “official Scottish tartan” for Michigan. Good thing our Legislature is one of the few “full-time” ones in the country, otherwise our lawmakers might not have time for this.

- House Bill 4772 would impose licensure and regulation on interior designers. The fact that in Michigan, “anyone

can claim to be an interior designer without any education or qualifications,” according to the top interior design lobbyist in Lansing, “puts the public at risk.” Most people hate ugly wallpaper, but is this the antidote?

A legislator from Warren introduced a resolution to urge those in high-rises to switch their lights off at night to deter bird crashes. Arguing that it wasn't a frivolous thing, she noted that lawmakers have also entertained the notions of declaring a Michigan cookie and a Michigan soup. I can't tell whether the birds lobbied for this one or if the legislator just had a little time on her hands.

Ominously, the grab bag-

gers seem intent on offering “refundable” tax credits if people do certain things or if it would help somebody's bottom line.

“Refundable” means that if the credit exceeds the recipient's tax liability, the state will cut them a check. Just since January, bills have been introduced to enact such credits for photovoltaic energy, ethanol, movie production, hybrid vehicle purchases and installing biomass-burning heaters.

Maybe it's time that we as taxpayers and voters query candidates for public office less on what they will do if elected and more on what they won't do. We need candidates who make promises like this:

“I am not running to be

Santa Claus. I will not support policies that favor the well-connected if they do not truly serve the public interest, too. I will not trivialize your trust by behaving as though your government has something to say or do about everything. I will not engage in the corrupting business of higher taxes for all and special breaks for a few. If it's not in the Constitution, it's not my job.”

Until we elect legislators who have the courage to speak and act that way, a part-time Legislature seems like a good idea.

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