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OUR VIEW

Leftovers

By Phillip Cease

The elections are over and campaign accounts are empty.

Well, not quite empty.

The question arises: What can – and can't – they do with all that money? While not state or federal funds, these campaign accounts are considered public funds, and state laws govern what they can be used for. Perhaps not surprisingly, these laws aren't as cut and dry as you would expect.

For an example of a politician who went too far, look at the former House Speaker, Bobby Harrell. He spent campaign funds on a trip to the grand opening of the Wizarding World of Harry Potter at Universal Studios. He claimed that the trip, which he took with his wife, was to meet with film executives about legislation. When pressed further, he couldn't document the meeting with film executives.

Harrell also used campaign money to reimburse himself for flights on his own private plane, and took a trip to a high school baseball game with the coach's wife and siblings of players. When asked to explain, he said it was a "a see and be seen trip." Harrell was eventually prosecuted and sentenced to probation and a fine, but plenty of other lawmakers have made similar sorts of expenditures.

Senate Finance chairman Hugh Leatherman spent a colossal \$1.9 million on his reelection campaign this year. Of that, \$60,000 was raised after his race was effectively over – he had primary opponents, but no general election opponent. The campaign was over, but that didn't mean Leatherman was done spending campaign money.

He spent those funds for floral arrangements

for funerals, a fundraiser in September (months after his race was over), a \$2,500 donation to "The School Foundation," and other expenses. Some of these expenses don't sound very campaign related, but law allows them. Indeed, it allows for much more.

In August, the House Ethics Committee met to discuss what members should and shouldn't spend campaign funds on. House candidates and members cannot use campaign funds on dry cleaning, gifts for other legislators, private social club memberships or living expenses. They can use campaign money for non-profit donations (as long as a family member doesn't benefit), cell phones and clothing.

That's right – clothing.

What else can campaign funds be spent on? Vacations.

A few years ago, 12 legislators went on a trip to Israel – some going with spouses. Thanks to the elastic interpretation of the ethics laws, legislators were able to pay their portion with campaign funds. Still unclear is what official campaign duties South Carolina legislators have in the Holy Land.

From raising tens of thousands of dollars immediately after your reelection is secure, to paying for flowers and charitable contributions, to buying clothes with campaign money (just don't use the same funds to dry clean them), laws governing campaign accounts are loophole-ridden and arbitrarily enforced.

So the campaigns are over. But the good times are still rollin'.

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