

NEW YORK POST

QUINN'S PHANTOM FUNDS

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April 4, 2008 -- Another day, another tantalizing hint of political scandal in New York - this time, involving taxpayer money parceled out by City Council Speaker Christine Quinn.

Details are unclear - and it's certainly far too early to accuse anyone of personal wrongdoing.

What emerged yesterday, however - in a front-page report by The Post's Frankie Edozien - is that Quinn's staff allocated some \$4.7 million in funding over the past two years to phantom organizations with names made up to sound like real community groups.

Such as: the Immigration Improvement Project of New York, the Association of Community Partners, Community Development for Stronger Neighborhoods . . .

Quinn stresses that she alerted authorities - at the city's Department of Investigation and the US attorney's office - and put an end to the practice the moment she learned of it last fall.

She also insists that the money ultimately went to honest-to-goodness legitimate groups - and that the practice long predates her tenure as speaker. (Indeed, former Speaker Peter Vallone Sr. noted yesterday that in his time such money was "parked" to cover shortfalls or unforeseen needs.)

But that sort of misses the point.

Assuming that cash didn't actually stick to anybody's fingers - and both DoI and the feds are conducting "broader" probes - it's fair to ask why money had to be "parked" in the first place.

The \$4.7 million was part of the council's annual "member item" appropriations - scores of millions of pork-barrel dollars doled out in the name of individual council members to non-profit and other favored organizations.

Sometimes a little piggie or two or three get overlooked - and the speaker must find the cash to cover those shortfalls or unforeseen needs Vallone mentioned.

We say "must" advisedly, because very often the member item is granted or withheld as a means of controlling how individual council members vote.

It's a repugnant, inherently corrupting practice - even if the cash does go to perfectly respectable groups.

Usually, that is.

The Post's David Seifman reported earlier this year that DoI formed a special unit to probe nonprofit

agencies; the fake community groups could very well be a part of that.

Meanwhile, to her credit, Quinn has been trying to make the budget more transparent. Names of council members who request funding now appear in the budget with each allocation they get, for example.

Mayor Bloomberg gave her an unequivocal vote of confidence yesterday: "Christine Quinn I've worked with for six years now," he said. "She's the most honest person I know."

Still, Quinn is a likely mayoral candidate next year - and the phantom funds may cause her a problem, even if her foes can only criticize her for lax staff oversight. (She says she tried to eliminate the practice of reserving funds even before last fall, but staffers disobeyed her. Hmm . . .)

This scandal - if, indeed, that's what it is - is in its infancy.

But whatever it turns out to be, it remains that once again the morally dubious member item is roiling the political waters in New York City.

It's past time to end them.

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