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Politics | Big Business: Republican lawmakers say its time we let the private sector work its magic

By Katharine Biele  
Posted 02/21/2008

The battle over the boundaries between public and private continues in this year's Legislature, but let's make this perfectly clear: it has nothing to do with education. Yet.

After getting slapped upside the head over the school voucher issue, conservative legislators are doubling back to make sure everyone's on board with The Concept. You know the one: Private businesses get the best bang for your buck because 1. they compete—and competition is always really good—2. they don't have all that bureaucratic crap to deal with, and 3. they aren't run by the monopoly government.

Never mind that part of the push and shove is that businesses like to get bigger, sometimes at the expense of the little guy and may just monopolize the services you so magnanimously give them.

Enter Sen. Howard Stephenson, R-Draper, and Rep. Craig Frank, R-Pleasant Grove, both with bills that will get government attention.

Stephenson's bill would have governments taking an inventory of services that could be done by the private sector and then disclosing that to the public. It's what proponents call the "Yellow Pages test." In other words, if you can find someone in the Yellow Pages who can provide a service, then government shouldn't be doing it.

To make the point, Stephenson trotted out Leonard Gilroy, director of government reform for



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**BEST OF Utah**

the Reason Foundation which describes itself as "a nonprofit organization dedicated to individual liberty, limited government, and advancing free minds and free markets."

So free-minded is it that Reason a few years ago opposed Provo's creation of its own fiber-optic network, by default bowing to the monopolistic Qwest Communications.

Anyway, Gilroy urged that government perform only "core" functions. The bill would require governments "draw those bright lines ... where they are competing with the private sector," Gilroy said. This would make government more transparent and accountable to a public that would then know just how many of their tax dollars are devoted to non-core government functions.

At this point, Sen. Scott McCoy, D-Salt Lake City, looked confused. What the heck is a core function anyway, he asked?

Uh, "we" don't provide the definition, said Stephenson. "That's determined by the governing body or entity; one may call something a core government function that another may call non-core. We'll see how it develops."

Indeed, the effort's all about being fuzzy. In a recent article, Royce Van Tassell of the Utah Taxpayers Association said governments aren't "satisfied with just managing education, roads, police and the other core duties that traditionally define the scope of government." Aha! It's a start at a definition, anyway.

The concept seems to be based on a moving target. "It's a philosophical disagreement," says Salt Lake County Mayor Peter Corroon. "Even some of those traditional things have been privatized."

Take jails, for instance. They used to be considered a government function, but there's a strong effort to privatize prisons now. Oh and how about state liquor stores?

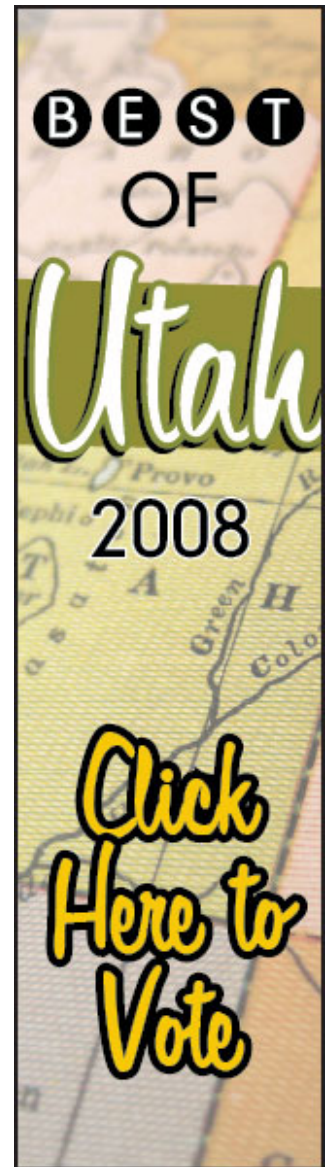
"That's one of the most interesting ones," Corroon says. "Why are those government-run?" Corroon acknowledges that health and safety issues should trump privatization interests, although that's not always the case.

Trash might seem like an easy privatization mark, but Corroon says there are definite health and safety concerns, not to mention the sustainability issues being addressed by recycling, which has long struggled with profitability.

Sen. Ross Romero, D-Salt Lake City, is one guy who doesn't get why private businesses couldn't do their own little inventories of what might be profitable and "privatizable." Don't they do that anyway, he asks?

In the political dialogue, though, profit takes a back seat to cost-saving efficiency. That is the stated goal of Reason, the Utah Taxpayers Association, and other libertarian-minded advocates. Sometimes, however, personal interest comes into play.

Some legislators have had complaints from businesses left out by government, even if it's by



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virtue of a fair bidding practice. Maybe those kinds of losers are behind the drive to privatize county recreation centers.

But wait. Didn't the Legislature just take \$35 million from the county's hotel taxes for the Real soccer stadium? Corroon laughs.

"The government often does help private business, and I don't have a problem with that as long as the public is getting a good return on dollar." He doesn't think that's the case with Real.

Meanwhile, the bills are moving along a narrowing path to passage. Public employees have demanded more of a voice on Frank's privatization board, and local governments are pushing to have the state look at its own house before mandating any other inventories of privatization candidates.

"You could privatize anything if you wanted to," Corroon says.

You could even privatize education.

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