

# Anti-Government Rhetoric, Funding Discussed

Speaker Gives Insight on Astroturf Groups

**T**EXASISNOTTHEONLYSTATEINWHICH a small but determined anti-government movement is making waves in federal, state and local politics.

Americans for Prosperity, Club for Growth, FreedomWorks, Americans for Tax Reform, National Taxpayers Union, ALG, Sam Adams Alliance, American Majority Incorporated are all national organizations fighting for extremely limited government, and they have friends, said Kay Coles, who has spent years researching anti-tax lobbying efforts in several states, including Maine, Michigan, Florida, California, Oregon, Illinois, Michigan, South Dakota, Alaska, and others.

Coles, who has a 30-year career in journalism, politics, lobbying and research and analysis, came to Austin in August to share the information she has gathered with county officials attending the TAC Annual Conference.

She talked about her experience working with South Dakota counties in 2008 to help defeat the proposed Open and Clean Government Act. The act would have banned government lobbying, an effort familiar to local officials in Texas, as Americans for Prosperity several years ago sued TAC for consulting with legislators about laws affecting counties. Local governments dubbed the proposal “the Gag Law.”

“(Counties) worked really closely together there, and also with the state chamber of commerce, so (there was) a pretty extensive and wide-ranging coalition to defeat this really bad policy,” Coles said. “What the so-called Open and Clean Government Act was about was really about tying the hands of local and county officials in the business that they could conduct.”

The initiative was illustrative of tactics used by anti-government groups, she said, for several reasons.

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cal expenditure limitations. In South Dakota, they’ll go the ballot initiative route. ... There were three other initiative attempts to pass a Taxpayer Bill of Rights before it finally passed in Colorado, so they waited 12 years to get their agenda enacted by an initiative referendum there. They are constantly repeating their efforts, they do not wear out.”

One reason the groups do not wear out is because of their wealthy funding sources. Though many of the groups are registered 501(c)3 non-profits, which makes it difficult to track donors, several of the organizations have had outspoken, wealthy founders and leaders.

For example, libertarian activist Howard Rich is a property investor from Manhattan who has been president of Americans for Limited Government and US Term Limits and has served on the Board of Directors for the Cato Institute and Club for Growth. David Koch, the 1980 Libertarian Party vice-presidential candidate, is a billionaire who co-owns Koch Industries, the largest privately held company in the United States. According to Forbes, he was the second wealthiest person living in Manhattan in 2008, behind Michael Bloomberg. Koch is also a board member of the Cato Institute and the Reason Foundation. The National Names Database Web site, a tool that shows connections between organizations, corporations and important political or financial figures, also links him to Americans for Prosperity.

“They want the free market to operate, and they want to operate unfettered,” Coles said.

Other infamous leaders of the movement include Grover Norquist, who founded Americans for Tax Reform in 1986 and infamously said in *The Nation* that his goal was to “cut government in half in 25 years, to get it down to the size where we can drown in the bathtub,” as well as Eric O’Keefe, chair and Chief Executive Officer of the Sam Adams Alliance who also serves on the Board of Directors for the Institute for Humane Studies, Club for Growth and Center for Competitive Politics.

“At the national level, they generate a lot of research, a lot of



Elected officials take notes during an educational session on corporate-sponsored groups seeking to abolish the right of local governments to consult with state lawmakers on legislation affecting their entities.

The current anti-government movement first broke ground in the 1970s and has spent more than 30 years perfecting its approach and rhetoric, Coles said. Almost all the groups have married their ideas with populist rhetoric, creating ballot initiatives with names like Open and Clean Government Act and Taxpayer Bill of Rights – all of which sound positive but are designed to hurt government’s ability to function.

“They have really learned how to use language to their advantage,” Coles said. “They attempt to squeeze and stop local governments from banding together to lobby their state legislatures because of violation of open and clean government.”

Nor only are the groups smart, they are also patient and resourceful.

“They use whatever processes are available to them,” Coles said. “In Texas, it would be trying to get the Legislature to enact lo-

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ideas,” Coles said about the organizations. “The larger organizations at the national level founded what is called the state policy network, and these are the state level think tanks. You here have the Texas Public Policy Foundation, and all the state level think tanks are also all connected.”

At the state legislative level, the groups are all coordinated partly through the American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC), which promotes “Limited Government, Free Markets, Federalism” according to its Web site. Several opposing groups including Defenders of Wildlife and the National Resources Defense Council have alleged that a majority of ALEC’s funding comes from oil companies and other corporations. Because of the level of corporate funding, the anti-government groups often are described as “Astroturf” — fake grassroots.

Though several anti-tax groups are currently focused on defeating federal health care proposals, more and more of the groups are also pushing their agendas at the local and state levels, Coles said.

“The national organizations are very effective in running Astroturf campaigns and providing campaign training and resources to the state level groups,” she said.

The parent groups also provide state chapters with tactics members can use locally, such as open records lawsuits.

“In 2006, we saw the entities that were running the TABOR campaigns come through and request from all levels of governments -- cities, counties and school districts — copies of any and all emails that referenced the TABOR initiative that was on the ballot. And it went to every entry in the three states where TABOR was on the ballot,” Coles said. The states included Nebraska, Oregon and Maine. “These were all coordinated. They all requested the records to be sent to the same researcher in Wisconsin,” who had been hired by Americans for Limited Government.

“They were using this tactic to just basically to try to chill any kind of speech or any form of communication that was going on about the TABOR issue at that time,” Coles added. ★

**TAC ANNUAL CONFERENCE**