

Creating Real Democracy Back Home

by Ruth Caplan

Corruption of government by monied interests comes in many stripes and flavors. After Citizens United, the focus has been on mega-bucks going to candidates via Super PACs. There is also big money poured into state ballot initiatives. Reporting on the California GMO ballot initiative last October, Reuters observed: “the state’s system of ‘direct democracy’ has morphed into a big-money battleground.”

Clearly, we need the proposed 28th Amendment to remove Constitutional rights for artificial entities, which the Alliance advocates along with others in Move to Amend. The amendment says in part: “The privileges of artificial entities shall be determined by the People, through Federal, State, or local law, and shall not be construed to be inherent or inalienable.”

Note here the inclusion of local law. This is essential, for real democracy can blossom at the local level where people know each other as neighbors and colleagues. Most important, a community can come together across ideological barriers when they are faced with protecting their community from corporate harm. This immediacy creates shared values with deeper roots than party ideology. In New England towns with the direct democracy tradition of town meetings, it can blur the lines between the public and policy makers. This “grassroots democracy” can be full of surprises.

This was driven home to me when Defending Water for Life worked with the small town of Barnstead, NH to advocate for a local ordinance declaring that water is a fundamental right for people and nature and that corporations have no constitutional rights, thus taking on settled law emanating from the US Supreme Court. The effort was led by the Chair of the Select Board, a Vietnam vet who voted for George Bush, and by a Rastafarian local biodynamic farmer, an unlikely alliance built on mutual respect.

Similarly, when towns in southwest Maine were threatened by Nestlé’s plans to pump water from a protected preserve, at least one member of the Tea Party was actively involved in the successful effort to pass an ordinance modeled on Barnstead.

Also in Maine, local food ordinances have been passed which assert the right of local farmers and their customers to establish a relationship of trust that the food is safe, rather than depending on, and being constrained by, rules written for agribusiness by Washington bureaucrats.

This is not to suggest that working at the local level is always easy or successful. In one town where Defending Water has worked on and off for nearly a decade, the monied interests of old families are so entrenched that taking them on, in this case by speaking out against their deals with Nestlé, can lead to the threat of being fired from a long-held and well-respected position as town librarian.

So, yes, money power and back room deals can be struck in local communities too, but it’s harder to keep them a secret and people can hold their elected officials directly accountable for their actions. They are our neighbors. We pass them on the street.

Communities can also use participatory budgeting to have a direct voice in how a community’s capital budget is spent to meet local needs identified and voted on by the people. Begun in Porto Alegre, Brazil, it is now spreading in the US from Chicago to New York City and soon to other cities. In New York City, community members worked directly with City agencies to come up with workable, fundable projects. Participatory budgeting is money talking with the people’s voice, (see JR Vol 5, #1, pg. 12).

As we work to change the system at the national level, let’s also organize in our local communities, where there is more of an opportunity to exercise direct democracy in our everyday lives to stop corporations from destroying what we hold dear in our communities and where policy makers are our neighbors, not far-off bureaucrats.

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Gail Darrell, center, and other Barnstead, New Hampshire, residents pressed for a law to counter the “tyranny and usurpation” of the people’s right to govern themselves, especially with regard to water. Gordon Preston, left, and Jack O’Neil were two of five selectmen who supported the ordinance.

photo: Channing Johnson Yes Magazine