



## **Think-tank director advocates privatizing government services**

By Debby Woodin

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JOPLIN, Mo. — A public policy director at a free-market government think-tank in St. Louis talked to the Joplin Kiwanis Club on Tuesday about the privatization of government services.

David Stokes, director of the local government policy for the Show-Me Institute, spoke about services that government could contract to private business that Show-Me believes would reduce costs to taxpayers.

Directors of the institute include co-founder Rex Sinquefield, and the institute is regarded as advancing Sinquefield's right-wing agenda. Stokes said those directors do not control his work.

In summarizing his message in Joplin, Stokes said, "Privatization is the use of the private sector to perform public services, often via outsourcing by government to the private sector."

He said some services such as trash hauling and operating utilities are functions better supplied under private sector control.

He cited Joplin and St. Louis County as examples of areas that have privately run utilities, while in Springfield, "you have one big municipal utility run by the government. We think there is solid evidence that the private sector does a better job than the government," such as some St. Louis suburban cities that a decade ago sold their water companies and "made a great deal of money for the taxpayers."

Another example, he said, was the former operation of a government-run pharmacy service in St. Louis County. He said that from 1997 to 2003, operational costs tripled, causing county commissioners to bid out the service to a commercial pharmacy. That cut the cost by a third, Stokes told the Kiwanis members.

Still, not every service functions as well under private interests, Stokes said.

"The No. 1 thing government should always do is the police powers. Nobody has ever outsourced police powers as far as I know in the United States," he said, adding that "the

government itself, the actual passing of laws, the elected and police powers are the primary things that should never be entrusted to the private sector.” The operation of parks is another area where government excels.

He said there are a couple of places that have used all private services except police and fire; one is Sandy Springs, Georgia, where even streets are built by neighborhood developers rather than the municipal government.

He noted that Joplin makes heavier use of privatization than many other cities since it has privately operated utilities, trash service and ambulance service.

One service he thought may be a benefit to Joplin is outsourcing swimming pool operations, as a number of small cities do.

“Sometimes the savings is small, maybe only a couple of thousand dollars,” he said. “But in the long run, you have fewer people on the government payroll, and you’re benefiting from the expertise of the private sector.”

Privatization does not always mean contracting with for-profit companies.

“There are lots of examples where nonprofits can play a big role, particularly in areas like animal control and community center operation, where local entities or animal welfare groups can work in coordination with government” to achieve taxpayer savings, Stokes said.

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