



Marysville citizens ask council to oppose Citizens United

by Christopher Andersson March 26, 2013

A group of Marysville citizens attended the March 18 City Council meeting to urge the council to make a resolution asking the U.S. Congress for a constitutional amendment overturning the Citizens United Supreme Court decision.

The 2010 Supreme Court Case Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission held that corporate funding for independent political broadcasts could not be limited due to the First Amendment.

Many cities, counties and states across the nation are adopting similar resolutions in an effort to build consensus for a retraction. Many jurisdictions, including 11 states, three counties in Washington state (including Snohomish), and 300 cities have passed similar resolutions, according to Rick Bligh, a resident of north Marysville who spoke at the meeting.

“We have a real problem in our democracy. A huge proportion of the people in our country believe that their voices are being stifled by the input of big money and the statistics bear that out,” said Ken Dammand, a resident of Tulalip and board member of Washington Public Campaigns, who spoke at the meeting.

Since the 2010 decision a “veritable landslide” of anonymous money has been put into political campaigns. This money is also not subject to contribution limits, he said.

The City Council voted 4-1 to draft a resolution and discuss more at a later meeting.

Councilmember Donna Wright dissented because she wanted to hear from people supporting the other side of the issue before making a decision.

Those who support the Supreme Court decision usually do so because of First Amendment reasons. John Samples and Ilya Shapiro, members of Libertarian think tank the Cato Institute, wrote that “to make campaign spending equal or nearly so, the government would have to force some people or groups to spend less than they wished. And equality of speech is inherently contrary to protecting speech from government restraint, which is ultimately the heart of American conceptions of free speech.”

However, many are worried about the harmful effects of corporate money on democracy.

This judgment affects all levels of the political process, even local politicians, said Dammand. He used the example of the coal train issue. If the City Council takes a position against increased train traffic, coal companies could throw thousands or millions of dollars to opposing candidates in the next election, he said.

“There's really no way that most candidates could compete against that kind of money. So that constitutes a threat, whether it gets done or not,” he said.

Dammand added he doesn't mean to vilify the coal companies, and that his example was hypothetical based on recent issues.

Some disagree with this notion and argue that corporate money is not any more harmful than the types of speech we do allow in campaigns. “Is there something uniquely harmful and/or unworthy of protection about political messages that come from corporations and unions, as opposed to, say, rich individuals, persuasive writers, or charismatic demagogues?” asks Anthony Dick in the National Review.

Amending the Constitution is one of the only ways for citizens to respond to a Supreme Court decision they feel is inappropriate, said Dammand. It is not a new tactic and has been successfully used to create seven amendments to the Constitution in the past, he said.

For more information about the Citizens United decision and the local response, go to Washington Public Campaigns at washclean.org.