



A better ‘tale’ than Tiger’s

By Jim Waters

Most of the conversations around Kentucky’s water coolers the last few weeks have focused on Tiger Woods. But what’s happening in Frankfort – even if the topics aren’t as “sexy” or, to the few who know about them, seem “par for the course” in government – affect Kentuckians more than anything happening in Tigerworld.

For example, you could chat about this scenario: Spend 20 years in the Legislature and then a three-year stint in some much higher-paying state job, and then get a “legislative” pension based on the three-year salary on the state job – not what you made as a part-time lawmaker. Oh, and add to that [pension benefit](#) free health care for spouses and dependent family members *for the rest of their lives*.

How’s that for stocking stuffing it to taxpayers?

The pension scam mirrors a statement offered by former Gov. Richard Lamm, D-Colo., about most government spending: “Christmas is a time when kids tell Santa what they want and adults pay for it. Deficits are when adults tell the government what they want and their kids pay for it.”

It’s time for taxpayers to quit playing Santa to grown politicians and for those lawmakers to realize Kentuckians are finding out who’s been naughty and who’s been nice.

So I put candy and prizes, not sticks and stones, in the stockings of Sen. Damon Thayer, R-Georgetown, and Rep. Jim DeCesare, R-Rockfield, who [filed legislation](#) this week aimed at increasing government transparency. If taxpayers can easily find out where their money goes, politicians might have less incentive to spend it into oblivion.

The transparency legislation would require all three branches of government to put their checkbook ledgers online and update them every 30 days. So Thayer atones (somewhat) for voting for the 2005 legislation that created that bogus pension formula.

By the way, that pension bill passed at the last second with little fanfare – and with the help of an amendment offered by Senate President David Williams, R-Burkesville, supposedly a Grinch when it comes to taxes and spending. But in this case, the Grinch stole Christmas from hard-working Kentuckians by changing the pension calculator for his pals.

Previously, lawmakers got a pension based on the average of their five highest-earning years in the Legislature. The 2005 law reduced that to the three highest-earning years, which alone would drive up pensions. But it also allowed legislators to count toward those three highest-earning years their tenures at *any* state or local government job in one of six state government-sponsored pensions.

Thayer admits that voting for the pension change was a big boo-boo.

“I didn’t realize the drain it would be on taxpayers’ dollars,” he said. “We need to repeal it.”

Following through on repeal, including pushing Williams and the House leadership to act, will complete Thayer’s penance. Thayer told the Lexington Herald-Leader that he’s working on a bill that “generally speaking would [close the loophole](#).”

If it’s repealed, then the honorable thing to do would be for those made wealthy by the policy this session – former Sens. Charlie Borders, R-Russell, and Dan Kelly, R-Springfield, and House Speaker Rep. Greg Stumbo, D-Prestonsburg – to reject the windfall increases in their pensions caused by this law.

In fact, all Kentucky legislators should reject a pension and taxpayer-funded health care costs – period. I’ve asked this before: What other part-time worker do you know that gets a fully funded pension financed by taxpayers, especially after just 20 years?

How can “we the people” be assured that lawmakers are not kowtowing to an administration – refusing to make the tough decisions and hiding behind a cloak of secrecy – just to avoid angering someone who could appoint them to a plum state job to bump up their pension? That’s certainly as important to Kentuckians as Tiger Woods avoiding pancake house hostesses and sponsor-killing trysts.

Isn’t it?

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