

"Rent-A-Politician" Exposed

by Peter Dreier

During the last week of the Boston City Council election campaign last fall, only five days before the November 3 climax, the daily Boston *Herald-American* ran a story under the headline: "Landlords Helped Fund Anti-Tenant Councilors." Its rival, the Boston *Globe*, told its readers: "Tenants Group Hits Councilmen's Record." Local TV and radio stations broadcast the same story. And the *Citizen-Item*, a well-read weekly that circulates in the heavily-tenant Allston-Brighton neighborhood, was more succinct: "Landlords Help Their Favorites."

A bit of investigative reporting by enterprising Boston journalists? Not at all. The stories about the links between landlords' money and politicians' voting records originated at the Massachusetts Tenants Organization and its local political arm, the Boston Tenants Campaign Organization (BTCO). In the midst of an otherwise dull and issueless City Council election, the Boston media grabbed the tenants' bait hook-line-and-sinker.

MONEY VS. VOTES

The politics of rental housing often boils down to a simple formula: Real estate interests' money vs. tenants' votes. Because their fate is tied directly to decisions made at City Hall — rents, taxes, evictions, inspections, and many other aspects of housing — both landlords and tenants have a big stake in who sits on City Council.

At election time, big developers and landlords can provide candidates with a financial war-chest. While the landlords are using tenants' rent money

to cozy up to politicians, tenants have to organize on a grassroots basis, using their votes to help their friends and punish their enemies in City Hall.

But rather than simply accept this imbalance as a political fact of life, tenants can use this David vs. Goliath scenario as a weapon in their strategic arsenal. During its campaign last fall to get its six-member "Tenant Ticket" slate elected to the City Council, the Boston Tenants Campaign Organization attracted media attention by pointing out how Boston's real estate powerbrokers were trying to influence City Councilors and their votes with campaign contributions. The result of careful research and good timing, the BTCO's expose not only garnered major publicity, but it also accomplished several other things: it gave the BTCO campaign — and the tenants movement — a big boost of credibility in the election; it also raised tenants' political consciousness by revealing the links between money and political influence; and, it put politicians on warning that both their votes on tenant issues and the sources of their funds would be closely scrutinized.

RESEARCHING CAMPAIGN FUNDS

The BTCO report had two parts: examining the real estate industry's campaign contributions to the nine incumbent City Council members (only six were running for re-election) and examining these Councilors' votes on a few critical housing issues. Then, of course, the researchers looked to see if there was any link between the two. Not surprisingly, there was. That made it a potential news story.

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Researchers first had to get a list of the major real estate interests in the city. It was decided to use the members of the Board of Directors of the Greater Boston Real Estate Board and its affiliate, the Rental Housing Association. The GBREB represents the entire industry (including brokers, commercial and industrial property owners and managers, as well as residential landlords), while the RHA represents only the latter group. (Homebuilders and mortgage bankers have separate lobby groups.) This list, obtained for the prior two years, represents a virtual "who's who" of the major firms and individuals that dominate Boston's real estate scene. To this group of over 50 individuals, BTCO added names of other landlords that had been the targets of various tenant groups, totaling 90 people in all. This research net thus caught most of the big fish, but ignored the small "Mom and Pop" landlords.

Unfortunately, with a few exceptions, the list did not include high-level employees of the major real estate firms; if they had had the time, this would have been an important addition, since, while individuals are limited to \$1000 contributions to each candidate by state law, companies can circumvent this rule by encouraging their staffs to make contributions to favored office-seekers.

Once the list was compiled, it was relatively easy (though time-consuming) to go to the City Clerk's office and look up each individual's (and spouse's) contributions to the incumbent City Council members. (They also looked at the challengers' files — for future reference.) Records were examined for the previous (1979) election, for the September (1981) primary, and for the years in-between. To evaluate the incumbent City Councilors' voting records, BTCO picked five critical votes during the previous few years dealing with rent control and condominium conversions — the two hottest tenant-oriented issues. Councilors were given a plus or minus for each vote and an overall percentage rating, ranging from zero (for four councilors) to 100% for tenant advocate Ray Flynn.

Once the research was done, it had to be analyzed and then packaged for a press conference, to turn these dull statistics into a "media event." The BTCO press package included a four-page list of every real estate honcho who had contributed any money and the amount he or she had given to each candidate. The total contributions of each real estate person was listed to show which ones were the real big spenders. The total contributions collected by each City Councilor were listed to reveal which ones were the real big beneficiaries of real estate largesse. In addition, the chart put an asterisk next to the real estate people who lived outside of Boston — to show that many don't even vote in the city, but exert influence anyway.

The accompanying press release analyzed the results of the study. It opened with a hard-hitting, catchy lead, noting that the BTCO's "unprecedented" study "exposed" the real estate community's attempt to "rent City Hall." Richard Marlin, the BTCO's chairperson, was quoted as follows: "Boston's landlords take our rent money and hand it over to the city councilors. Then these councilors turn around and vote against tenants. Tenants ought to know where their money winds up."

A press conference was called at City Hall to release the report. BTCO spokespersons explained the findings and their implications, used a large but simple chart that showed clearly (for the TV

cameras) which incumbents were "in the pockets" of the landlords, and emphasized the positive role that the BTCO and its "Tenant Ticket" were playing in the current campaign.

That night, the major TV and radio outlets prominently played the BTCO report, and the next morning both daily papers followed suit. They all named names, gave money figures and vote records. BTCO's enemies — the incumbents with the worst voting records and most landlord money — were given a chance to reply to BTCO's charges. This helped the tenants by polarizing the issue and making it clear who was and wasn't on their side. The *Globe*, for example, interviewed Councilor Christopher Iannella, a long-time tenant foe who had a zero voting record and the most contributions from real estate interests. According to the *Globe*:

"Contacted yesterday Iannella said he denied 'completely and absolutely' that contributions from real estate developers or landlords had ever influenced his votes on housing issues.

"Many of these fellows are old friends of mine," said Iannella, denying that their possible real estate interests "had motivated their contributions."

LESSONS TO BE LEARNED

Tenant groups around the country can learn several lessons from the BTCO's experience. Keep an ongoing record of major real estate figures, culled from local newspapers, real estate trade journals and newsletters, local real estate boards and landlord groups. Collect and update the campaign contributions of politicians — incumbents and challengers, winners and losers (who often run again). Get friendly politicians to introduce pro-tenant legislation and try to get city councils and state legislatures to have *roll call votes* on as many tenant issues as possible. Even if the bills don't have much chance of passing now, the votes can be used later to evaluate politicians' records and to issue a voting "scorecard." Use the media to your advantage: Elected officials are supposed to be public servants, not puppets of "special interests." The press likes to expose these contradictions, especially when they don't have to do the work to obtain the information. Orchestrate these events as much as possible. Think about timing, location, and catch-phrases that will make the most of your research. Follow up on your media attention. Keep a record of the reporters who covered the story, stay in touch with them, and feed them other stories on tenants' problems and issues. They are your link to the broader public. Finally, use the publicity to help your grassroots organizing. Xerox and distribute copies of the newspaper stories while doing door-to-door canvassing and voter registration. Many tenants may not have heard of your organization, but they will recall the story they read in the paper or saw on TV. It's instant credibility, a foot in the door that allows you to talk to them about the election or your organizing drive.

Democracy may not work the way we were taught in civics class, but in all elections there is one bottom line: who gets the most votes. Across the country, tenants have shown that they can overcome the landlords' big money with effective nuts-and-bolts organizing. Americans have a basic sense of fairness — corporations and the wealthy shouldn't be allowed to "buy" an election or a politician. Exposing landlords' attempts to do so is one tactic tenant groups can use to their advantage. ■