

Gifts, grants to state exceed \$11 million

An inflatable mascot and an SUV have been reported since a new law took effect July 1.

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A new Iowa law is shedding light on the many gifts and grants that state government receives annually from a variety of sources.

Since July 1, gifts worth more than \$62,000 and grants totaling more than \$11 million have been reported to the state ethics board.

The reporting requirement helps ensure that all sources of money are disclosed to the Legislature and that the public knows about them as well, supporters say.

The biggest gift accepted recently by Gov. Tom Vilsack on behalf of the state is a Chevrolet Tahoe sport utility vehicle on loan from General Motors.

The state gets to use the vehicle for a year to promote ethanol. The "E85" vehicle runs on a blend of 85 percent ethanol and 15 percent gasoline. The value of the gift was put at \$35,000. The Department of Natural Resources is using the vehicle, which Director Jeff Vonk drives most of the time.

Perhaps the most unusual gift is a "Trooper Bear" mascot for the Iowa State Patrol.

The inflatable mascot was purchased with \$3,800 from Werner Enterprises, an Omaha trucking firm. Standing more than 9 feet tall, Trooper Bear made its debut at the Iowa State Fair and will make appearances at other events around Iowa to promote safety.

The State Patrol also benefited from a \$1,000 donation from a foundation formed by Wal-Mart. The money was used to buy equipment for monitoring traffic speeds.

Thirteen state agencies have already filed disclosure reports under the new law. While there continue to be no restrictions on the size and types of gifts to state government, "now we at least get public disclosure," said Charlie Smithson, executive director of the Iowa Ethics and Campaign Disclosure Board.

Gifts made specifically to individual public officials - including legislators and the governor - are limited to \$3 if the gifts come from registered lobbyists or others with an interest in influencing legislation.

Most of the recent donations to state agencies are less than \$1,000.

Ben Miller, owner of an Iowa City-area home construction business, sent a \$100 check to Vilsack for the Iowa State Patrol's safety education program.

Miller decided to make the donation after he nearly caused a rear-end collision on a busy highway while talking on a cell phone. A state trooper gave him a warning for driving too closely.

Miller said he was thankful that the State Patrol had been on the scene that day in mid-July and was so vigilant.

"Normally I don't like to see the patrol, but that day I was very happy to see them around," he said.

Other gifts to state agencies include:

- The Department of Public Defense received gifts for a memorial bench and tree at the Iowa Army National Guard facility in Denison. The memorial was established for Sgt. Casey Byers of Schleswig, the 28th Iowan to die in Iraq since the war began in March 2003.

- Money given to the Iowa Department for the Blind was used to purchase special Bibles and large-print books.

- Gifts to the Iowa Veterans Home in Marshalltown paid for glider chairs, mattress covers and library bookcases for residents.

- State Auditor Dave Vaudt reported receiving a gift basket, worth \$35, containing two jars of salsa, a mug, a hand towel and a scented candle for being grand marshal of a parade in Storm Lake.

State agencies also are required under the new law to report the receipt of grants from the federal government and other sources.

The Iowa Department of Public Health recently received \$4 million for cancer prevention and control activities.

The Governor's Office of Drug Control Policy got more than \$3 million for anti-crime programs.

The Wellmark Foundation provided the Iowa Department of Human Services with \$100,000 to do a study on obstacles to people enrolling in government-sponsored programs for health care.

"I think it's essential to have that information" in setting budgets for state agencies, said Rep. George Eichhorn, a Stratford Republican.

The reporting requirement was attached to House File 810, one of several budget bills approved by the Legislature last spring.

Also on the Web

Reports from state agencies on gifts, bequests and grants they receive from private or other government sources can be viewed at the Web site for the Iowa Ethics and Campaign Disclosure Board. The address is: www.state.ia.us/government/iecdb/ethics/gifts.htm

Gifts to governor

Gov. Tom Vilsack logged about 100 personal gifts last year from foreign dignitaries, assorted groups and individual citizens.

The gift stash included a hand-painted ceramic baby, sailboat sculpture, two Bibles, clocks, polo shirts, books, CDs, fishing lures from the New Zealand ambassador, hand-carved golf balls, a signed boxing glove, an orange sweatshirt and Christmas tree ornaments from the Alabama and Colorado governors.

From a Japanese biotech conference, Vilsack brought home chopsticks, key rings, a tie rack and tie, cuff links, a necklace, a plastic fan, postcards, a note pad and a decorative dish.

Many of these personal gifts were passed along to Capitol View Elementary School, designated the partner school for the governor's office.

A few of the items were put to use by Vilsack and his staff at the Statehouse, including a tote bag, a paperweight, a picture frame and a coffee mug from the Iowa State Patrol.

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