

# Wilmington councilman: Require public meetings for discretionary fund

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(Photo: KYLE GRANTHAM/THE NEWS JOURNAL)

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When former Wilmington City Council President Theo Gregory directed nearly \$600,000 to a nonprofit he founded, he was not required to share grant information with the public or his colleagues.

He was not obligated to defend its annual use in a finance committee meeting. And without a city council budget hearing, many city residents were unaware the discretionary fund from which it came even existed.

Councilman Bob Williams wants to change that.



"When you have to start answering questions, priorities become different," he said.

In response to transparency for the discretionary fund, Williams plans to introduce an ordinance that would require more financial disclosure.

Grant proposals over a certain amount, perhaps \$5,000, would be presented to the council finance committee for discussion, Williams said. Grants lower than the threshold would be presented to the finance committee for the sake of transparency, but would not need approval, he said.

The nearly \$450,000 annual pot of discretionary funds is divided among council members, who get \$10,000 each they mostly use for scholarships, and the president, who controls the remaining \$327,000. The money is used for handouts to nonprofits, charities, civic associations and other groups of council's choosing for what one expert calls "political lubrication."

Williams would also like to apply disclosure requirements for discretionary spending by the mayor.

The mayor's office, along with council, spent \$1,500 to sponsor a wrestling match at the Riverfront this year — an "economic investment" that included free tickets for former City Councilman Norman Oliver and his plus one, Chief of Staff Tanya Washington, who makes over \$116,000 annually, and her husband, and two other tickets that went unused.

The News Journal has filed a Freedom of Information Act request for four years of mayoral discretionary spending but has not yet received a response.

The details and the threshold of Williams' legislation have not been decided, but the District 7 councilman plans to present an ordinance when council returns from summer recess.

**STORY:** [Little oversight for Wilmington City Council discretionary fund](#)

**Interactive graphic:** [How did your council rep spend their discretionary dollars? Explore the data here](#)



Wilmington City Council President Hanifa Shabazz (Photo: William Bretzger, The News Journal-USA TODAY NETWORK)

Council President Hanifa Shabazz has said the discretionary fund is already transparent because grant information is available through a Freedom of Information Act request. But that only allows residents to learn about grants after they're awarded, and a requester would have to know about the discretionary fund in the first place, Williams said.

"My concern is: How does anyone know what to look for unless there's some oversight?" Williams said.

Wilmington has guidelines for how funds should be used but hasn't adopted procedures used elsewhere in Delaware.

In New Castle County, an organization can receive no more than \$2,500 per year from one or multiple members of the County Council, said James Boyle, New Castle County Council policy director. Grants over \$150 must be presented to the council during a public meeting for a vote.

Grant requesters in Sussex County fill out an application on the county website, according to Gina Jennings, the finance director. The completed application is available in a public packet on the county website before a council meeting where members vote on the request.

Williams said he considered making Wilmington's threshold \$500 but didn't want to "bog down" the finance committee with hundreds of items to approve.

"The president has to have a certain level of discretion because to pull council together to decide on petty things is monotonous," he said. "But when we're talking about high dollars or dollars of concern, maybe there needs to be some teamwork involved."

City Council has had some form of discretionary dollars for decades, whether in control of the president or individual members.

# Pet project is pe

## Gregory attacked over contract for friend

By Andrew Staub  
The News Journal

As Wilmington braces for a budget showdown Thursday, Mayor Dennis P. Williams' administration uncorked a last-minute power-play: Alleging there's evidence that the City Council could mismanage a controversial pot of money that has proven the major barrier to peace over next year's \$145 million spending plan.

The administration's concern centers

around contracts awarded earlier this year for Education Voices. It's an advocacy organization that Council President Theo Gregory wants to further fund using more than half of a \$250,000 allocation council members brought under their control during the budget process.

Alexandra Coppadge, a spokeswoman for the mayor, contended the contracts for a "city-established nonprofit" were opaquely executed, with no legislation calling for its development and without anyone from the mayor's office on

News coverage from 2013 shows Theo Gregory fought for the \$250,000 grant fund he would spend largely on Education Voices. Mayor Dennis P. Williams warned the fund could be mismanaged. (Photo: News Journal archives)

But a \$250,000 grant fund managed by the president — which Gregory largely used to support Education Voices, the nonprofit he founded — is somewhat recent. Council put that money in its budget for youth projects in 2013, and it was a major sticking point in passing the budget that year, News Journal archives show.

Then-mayor Dennis P. Williams warned the money would be mismanaged and would lack oversight. He wanted to put the \$250,000 in the parks and recreation department.

He argued that council had seized executive responsibilities and vetoed a budget passed by council, calling the cash a "slush fund." The mayor offered to give council members money for their individual initiatives as long as the funds flowed through city departments.

Gregory ultimately won the fight with a veto override. Gregory said Education Voices was a necessary resource for the city's youth and said he wanted to provide seed funding, archives show.

In fact, Education Voices got four fiscal years of seed funding: \$173,000 in 2014, \$150,000 in 2015, \$122,000 in 2016 and \$150,000 in 2017. Over four years, the nonprofit received by far the most funds.

Council members who were in office in 2013 told The News Journal they were aware of the initial support but did not know about the continued funding, or the heft of it.

Politicians may feel they're allocating money for worthy causes, but Councilman Williams said they should be able to defend their choices before the public.

"When you've been doing it for a period time, your comfort level is such that you don't see (a problem)," he said. "But that doesn't mean its right."

*Note: You can see four years of Wilmington City Council discretionary fund data [here](#).*

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#### **My Comment:**

**Again this article has to do with open public transparency of taxpayer dollars. I do not see why there would be any opposition to what is the right thing to do. I have a big problem with monies being used for private entertainment especially when a number of the very poor are not invited to share some of these events. Civic volunteer's leaders are not even offered tickets to events let alone informed of them; that is if you are not within the circle. Enough of this and the voters need to pay very close attention. Councilman Williams please stay of this and see it though there are many that you probably would not hear from that would say "oh hell yeah" Open transparency!**