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## Homeland Security Grants – A Not So Funny Joke

by Jennifer Gritt

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I live in Appleton, WI, and I'll bet each and every American \$5.00 that not one member of al-Qaeda can locate it on a map. Now I'm sure there are few football fans out there who might take me up on that bet seeing how Appleton lies just southwest of its more famous cousin Green Bay. And everyone knows Osama and company are not exactly Packer fans, now are they. So I shouldn't be so quick to bet on something like that, right? Yeah, well, I'll take my chances.

Yet even if Appleton or Green Bay or the collection of little towns, villages, and cities that make up the entire Fox River valley *are* potential targets for a terrorist attack, rest assured I can sleep well tonight. Why? Because the Homeland Security Department was established to protect me against such atrocities in my neighborhood. And how are they going to do that, you ask? By donating millions of U.S. taxpayer dollars to my local governments so that they can buy the fire fighting and police equipment they've always wanted. "The Homeland is more secure when each hometown is more secure," Director Tom Ridge recently told a bunch of nodding heads. I don't know about you, but I feel safer from international terrorism already.

This is how it works. First, \$41.34 billion of taxpayer money is poured into the Homeland Security Department via your political "pals" in Washington (with a proposed \$47.4 billion slated for the next round). Next, Wisconsin (or insert your own state here) receives several millions under the guise of protecting Americans against terrorism. Then the state disburses X amount of dollars to the separate counties who in turn divvy up the monies to individual municipalities in true "each according to their need" fashion. Who says federalism doesn't work. Except in this case, it's taxpayer money – not power – being distributed through the different tiers of government. Karl Marx would be pleased.

And just what is this money really being used for? Here are just a few examples.

A ten minute car ride east takes me to a lovely little village called Combined Locks. A lucky recipient of Homeland Security grant money, the first responders there decided that the best way to protect residents from a biological attack was to install bulletproof glass in its police headquarters. And all I can say is, it's about time! Because the total number of drive-by shootings at that building last year came to a disturbing zero. The fire department of the neighboring village of Little Chute received \$38,000. They used that money to purchase brand new air tanks even though I'm pretty sure they would have already been equipped with ones that worked seeing how they are firefighters and all.

Now don't worry because Wisconsin is not the only state receiving millions of taxpayer dollars to distribute to small town communities like the ones that surround me. Small towns all over the U.S. such as those scattered throughout New Hampshire, Nevada, Illinois, and Wyoming are benefiting as well. Of the \$2 million that's slated for New Hampshire, a chunk of that is going toward making sure local police departments "get access to satellite television channels that transmit continuous news." Gee, I wonder if I became a flag-waving, Bush-saluting member of the Americorps if I could convince the federal government to pay for my digital cable too? And it doesn't require a doctorate in mathematics to calculate how much federal grant money is being dumped into the coffers of local governments nationwide to pay for stuff like this. A point of fact that becomes even more irritating when our major airports and water ports are still facing significant security challenges.

But I guess Americans have been convinced that these small town first responder units really need this grant money so that they are better prepared for terrorist attacks. Never mind that disasters such as those that befell New York and Washington on 9-11 are probably not going to be unleashed upon the Fox Cities Performing Arts Center. And even if a terrorist bombing did occur here, first responders in this area already have the equipment and training they need. These units have fully functioning emergency vehicles and they know how to rescue people from a burning building and treat the wounded. So what it comes down to is that this money is being used to buy equipment local fire and police departments could never afford or could never convince their local governments (and us residents) that the items were necessary. In addition, the money is being used for extra training in how to deal with future terrorist-related disasters even if these first responders live in a rural town with a population of 300 and that includes the cats, dogs, horses, and cows. And it's "free money" these local first responder units are not going to readily want to give up.

But not everyone in my hometown area is taking part in the Homeland Security grant free for all. Police Chief David Peterson heads up the Fox Valley Metro police department which serves both Little Chute and neighboring Kimberly. When asked what he thought about the Homeland Security Department and the current grant frenzy, he replied: "In a nutshell, I think it's a joke." Pointing out that the national debt has reached a record-breaking, heart-stopping \$7 trillion, Peterson sees the Homeland Security grants as nothing more than a colossal waste. "We're supposedly trying to cut back on a deficit," he stressed, but at the same time "every state wants a piece of the pie." For this police chief, the Homeland Security grants are nothing more than job security for Senators. Peterson, who has kept his

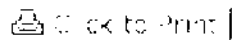
police department's budget running in the black for the past several years, stressed that if more politicians and other civil servants operated the same way, America wouldn't be facing such a huge national deficit. "Could I upgrade some equipment here?" Peterson said, "Sure. But I'll do it the right way."

Now to be fair, there are others out there who are beginning to realize that the Homeland Security grant program is a bit flawed. Overall though, local first responders are taking advantage of the taxpayer money being made available to them. But what's more important is that it doesn't matter how many new air tanks, tazer guns, and other equipment local police and fire departments purchase with this grant money – none of this is going protect Americans from the acts of terrorism that devastated New York and Washington. Suicide missions cannot be easily deterred as our soldiers in Iraq – not to mention everyone living in and around Jerusalem – have learned. For that, we're going to have a take a cold, hard look into how and why America is an enemy to these terrorist groups in the first place.

But hey, at least the police headquarters in Combined Locks is well protected.

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