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## State panel's oversight of spending criticized

### Controlling Board chief says 7-person group is doing job properly

Friday, April 4, 2003

**Alan Johnson**  
THE COLUMBUS DISPATCH

The State Controlling Board is doing an inadequate job of keeping a grip on the pursestrings for billions of dollars in state spending and has usurped some legislative powers, according to a critical analysis.

A report released today by Policy Matters Ohio, a nonpartisan research institute in Cleveland, characterized the seven-member board as sometimes operating like "a missing chapter of Alice in Wonderland."

"Too Much Power, Too Little Oversight," a yearlong study of the little-known but powerful board, also took issue with how the panel transfers money between accounts, a lack of aggressive scrutiny of unbid contracts and "remarkably weak record-keeping."

Lisa H. Dodge, president of the Controlling Board since she was appointed in December 2001 by Gov. Bob Taft, disagreed with the findings and discounted the entire report.

"What Policy Matters has put forth is a subjective analysis with which we disagree wholeheartedly," Dodge said. She said the group failed to understand how the board operates.

The Controlling Board is composed of six members of the legislature -- currently four Republicans and two Democrats -- plus the president, who is appointed by the governor. The panel was created in 1917 and made

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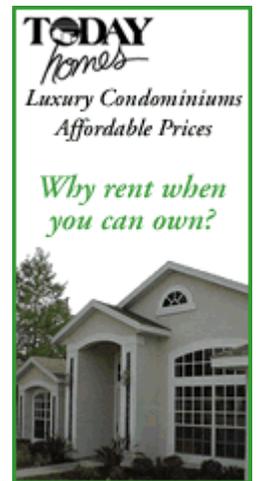
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permanent 60 years later.

The board was set up as a check and balance on state spending. Its primary responsibility is approving contracts and other spending previously enacted by the General Assembly. Through the years, however, its powers have broadened.

The report found that the board did not carefully scrutinize spending proposals that came before it, rejecting just one of 1,665 agency requests last year. Another 52 requests were deferred, but most were subsequently approved or withdrawn.

Policy Matters said that the board often moved money between accounts within state agencies, perhaps violating legislative intent on how the money should or should not be spent.

Further, the board routinely approved contracts and spending without competitive bidding. There were 567 such waivers totaling \$793 million in 2002, including approvals for the Department of Transportation to spend \$61.9 million and \$42.8 million in separate packages for highway-construction consultants.

The granddaddy of all unbid contracts is the Multi-Agency Radio Communications System, a \$328 million high-tech system linking a dozen state agencies, the study found.

A previous review by The Dispatch, covering October 1998 through September 1999, found that the board approved \$2.3 billion in contracts not competitively bid.

By comparison, state agencies awarded \$703 million in competitively bid contracts during a similar one-year period.

Policy Matters singled out the Department of Rehabilitation and Correction for seeking and obtaining approval of dozens of unbid contracts for private doctors, psychiatrists, dentists and pharmacists for the prison system. The board approved 64 such waivers of competitive bidding totaling \$31 million last year, the report found.

When legislative members of the board ask questions during biweekly meetings, they often get nonresponsive answers, no answers or promises of information delivered after the matter is approved, Policy Matters found.

"There often is a disconnect between the questions asked and the responses given," the report said, "leading an observer to wonder if he or she has wandered into a missing chapter of Alice in Wonderland."

Dodge said Controlling Board members are looking more carefully at spending, especially in view of the state's current financial crisis.

"The board members are looking at all the requests, looking at what do we need to do right now as opposed to what we can put off until we're in a better financial situation."

She said that while many times competitive bids are not sought for many contracts, a process of competitive selection is frequently employed in which agencies solicit and select from competing proposals.

Dodge likewise defended the practice of "blanket approvals" in which dozens of noncontroversial items are approved together without discussion.

"These are elected officials who have something better to do rather than go through individual items with which they have no concern."

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