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Editorial: Berkeley County right to look at p-cards

BY THE EDITORIAL STAFF

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Hundreds of Charleston County employees were issued Bank of America-issued procurement cards, or p-cards.

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In light of an investigation into questionable spending by Charleston County employees last year, Berkeley County deserves credit for re-evaluating its own policy and perhaps reeling in some of the 219 purchase cards issued to its roughly 1,280 employees. Dorchester County should follow suit.

Credit cards, known in government circles as purchase cards or p-cards, can be a handy, cost-saving tool for local governments for incidental expenses such as office supplies, gasoline or office parties. For example, Charleston County saved \$154,569 on \$11.6 million in purchases in fiscal 2017-18, but an investigation by Post and Courier reporter Tony

Bartleme turned up more than a few questionable or inadequately documented charges.

And recently, at the behest of Supervisor Johnny Cribb, Berkeley County has begun re-evaluating its policy. It's a straight-forward way to cut misspending, abuse or its likelihood, and it helps build trust with taxpayers.

"Some departments need p-cards more often than others, and they use them in different ways," Deputy Supervisor Les Blankenship told Berkeley County Council. "We want to make sure ... the right people have the cards and they're using them for the right things."

Tighter controls on p-cards within the Berkeley County School District dramatically cut monthly spending, according to County Councilman Josh Whitley, also the school board's legal counsel.

Dorchester County, with only 54 p-cards issued to 952 employees, should be able to make quick work of an audit.

Charleston County misuses uncovered by The Post and Courier in 2018 were mostly petty – they included charges for a spouse's trip to a conference, uniforms, car washes and other prohibited purchases. But in 2017, one long-time county employee was charged with embezzlement for purchases totaling nearly \$25,000 dating back to 2013.

In January, Charleston County had about 520 p-cards issued to roughly 1,310 employees. The Sheriff's Office, which has a separate budget and about 800 employees, had about 370 cards in use. Since then, the county has trimmed to 818 the number of p-cards issued to employees, including deputies, according to county spokesman Shawn Smetana.

Certainly, part of the problem was having so many p-cards in circulation compared to government entities of a similar size. But the way purchases were approved also raised questions. Monthly charges were typically reconciled within each department by p-card liaisons – an arrangement we suggested might be too cozy -- rather than by the Contracts and Procurement Department, which is in charge of the overall p-card program.

Most local governments have had p-card programs since the early 2000s. Good up-to-date policies and strong internal controls can help cut spending, fraud and the potential for fraud.