

St. Petersburg Times

tampabay.com

March 14, 2009

Special interests funnel \$6 million to Florida lawmakers

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State lawmakers collect from special interests by funneling money through committees, then spend it as they wish.

TALLAHASSEE - In the latest election cycle, dozens of Florida legislators raked in \$6 million in special-interest campaign money and spent a good deal of it on themselves for meals, rental cars, plane trips and hotels.

Some lawmakers are feeding at the trough of contributors, enjoying expensive dinners at upscale restaurants with donors' money at a time when one of every 10 Floridians is on food stamps. Others are churning cash from one political committee to another, using it to finance direct contributions and attack ads for other candidates, thereby strengthening their own clout in a virtually untraceable shell game.

All of this is legal. Florida law bans legislators from accepting so much as a cup of coffee from a lobbyist, and individual campaign contributions are limited to \$500.

But there is no limit on the amount of cash lawmakers can collect from all manner of special interests in separate fundraising committees the lawmakers create to advance broadly defined public purposes, such as getting one another re-elected.

"If I do it over coffee, I have to pay for my own coffee, but I can accept a \$10,000 check," said Sen. Dave Aronberg, a Democrat from Greenacres who has used political committees to recruit candidates and steer money to several Democratic legislative campaigns.

Florida law says money raised for the committee can be spent only in support of its often-nebulous mission, but there is no oversight of the expenditures. Lawmakers defend the growing practice of using the contributions for personal expenses, citing their own modest means and the demands of being visible in the fourth-largest state.

"We are traveling the state, and we're going to eat and sleep over in different places," said Sen. Mike Haridopolos, R-Melbourne, a possible future Senate president. "We're not charging the state. This is not taxpayer money."

He also pointed out that lawmakers quickly post their individual contribution and expense records on their own Web sites.

The enormous amounts of money have also spawned a cottage industry for advertising, media and political consulting firms, many of whom create their own political committees to send money back to the accounts of the legislators who hire them.

A *Times/Herald* review of fundraising and spending patterns over the last two years of 40 lawmaker-connected political committees shows legislators have spent substantial amounts on consultants, advertising, staff, travel and meals not directly tied to the committees' stated missions. No law prohibits the practice, and legislators themselves write the campaign finance laws.

The committees operate under noble-sounding names such as Senate President Jeff Atwater's "Preserve the American Dream," Sen. Mike Fasano's "Floridians for Principled Government" and Sen. Dan Gelber's "A Better Way for Florida."

The one controlled by Haridopolos, the Committee for Florida's Fiscal Future, which is also connected with Rep. Carlos Lopez-Cantera, R-Miami, spent the most on food in the past two years, \$12,495. The biggest dinner tab, for \$530, was at Ruth's Chris Steak House in Coral Gables.

Their committee also used donations to buy flowers and gasoline, and to pay cell phone bills, and Haridopolos reimbursed himself for thousands of dollars in expenses.

"I'm going out there currying my leadership votes and gaining support around the state," said Haridopolos, who noted that most donor-paid meals are in the \$25 range. "We're not wining and dining too many people."

Most of the 40 committees are controlled by Republicans, who make up a solid majority in the Legislature. But the No. 4 committee in fundraising since 2007 is controlled by Aronberg, the Democratic senator from Greenacres.

"I try to help recruit candidates under the Democratic Party brand, to run as centrist candidates in competitive districts," said Aronberg, an attorney general hopeful.

He used the money to hire a consultant to help him recruit candidates and travel to rural areas of the state where "the party's brand was suffering."

Aronberg has filed legislation that would ban these slush funds, known as committees of continuing existence. One major problem: He can't find a House sponsor.

"We need a different set of rules because I think there is too much money in this process," he said. "But you have to change them for everyone. I'm playing by the rules because, if you don't, you could be destroyed in this process. Unilateral disarmament does not work."

After news reports on secret slush funds a few years ago prompted former Gov. Jeb Bush to say the practice "stinks," lawmakers required all donations to be promptly disclosed on committee Web sites. But the fundraising continues unabated.

This year, the fundraising frenzy continued up until the last hours before the legislative session began March 3. Rep. Adam Hasner, R-Delray Beach, collected \$48,700 that day alone, some of it at a fundraiser at the Governor's Club at which a *Times/Herald* reporter was denied entry.

Hasner is the only legislator who controls three separate committees, called Florida on the Move I, II and III. Hasner's single biggest check recorded March 2 was \$10,000 from the American Council of Life Insurers. Four months ago, he cruised to re-election as the first state House candidate to raise more than \$1 million.

"I have a lot of supporters," Hasner said. "Just because they contribute to me doesn't mean I adopt their platform. They are adopting mine."

The Hospital Corporation of America, a major hospital chain seeking to change the way more than \$1 billion in hospital money is awarded each year, donated the most money to the committees: \$269,000 in the past two years. HCA also donated an additional \$865,000 to other committees and to individual lawmaker campaigns in the same two-year period.

U.S. Sugar Corp. of Clewiston, which has hired 41 lobbyists in seeking to sell much of its land to the state, is next with \$226,260. It donated an additional \$365,000 to lawmakers and other political groups this election cycle.

AT&T, which is seeking favorable phone legislation this year, was the No. 3 contributor with \$151,500.

Many of the committees' mission statements cite a goal of helping to elect like-minded candidates. But over the past two years, they collectively spent a total of \$210,500 in \$500 contributions directly to candidates. More than \$1 million, or five times as much money, went in payments to consultants.

In many cases, it is impossible to track who really donated the money to a committee or a legislator. Atwater's

committee paid \$196,000 to Public Concepts, the political consulting firm of Randy Nielsen. Nielsen's firm has its own political action committee, Free Speech PAC, which last year received a \$200,000 check from a political committee controlled by six Republican senators: Haridopolos, JD Alexander, Carey Baker, Mike Bennett, Alex Diaz de la Portilla and Ken Pruitt. Then Free Speech PAC gave \$90,000 to the Florida Medical Association's political action committee.

Why? Nielsen doesn't recall. But he noted that because of Florida's "convoluted" election laws, committees controlled by legislators can't buy ads for candidates and therefore must shift money around to other entities to accomplish their goals.

"It's a balkanized mess," he said. "I'm an advocate for simplification of the whole system." He suggests that the fundraising caps be removed for legislators, the political committees be allowed to operate unfettered and every dime they collect be reported within 48 hours to the Division of Elections.

This month, the fund connected to the six GOP senators, Alliance for a Strong Economy, paid \$10,000 to a lobbying firm tied to Ralph Arza, a former GOP House leader whose rapid downfall followed an expletive-laden phone rant against a colleague in 2006.

None of the senators would take responsibility for the committee's expenditures. They say they just raised money for it, but did not know who spent the money.

Lobbyists with fewer clients complain that demand for big money donations is increasing, even during the session when fundraising isn't permitted. As a result, it's becoming harder for their generosity to gain a legislator's attention. They also say that donations to committees are spent for so many different purposes that it's impossible to link a donation to a candidate or a cause.

"It's like giving to the parties," said lobbyist Travis Moore. "Is it being spent on messaging, or travel?"

Fort Lauderdale Rep. Ellyn Bogdanoff's fund, fortified by \$10,000 checks from insurers and lobbyists, has paid campaign consultant Todd Richardson \$110,000. Bogdanoff, a Republican, chairs the House Finance and Tax Council, which is reviewing whether to eliminate some of the hundreds of business-friendly sales tax exemptions.

Donors to her committee, called Creating Possibilities, include hospitals, insurance agents, land surveyors, racetracks, real estate agents and restaurants. Bogdanoff has spent \$140,564 in the past two years, of which \$12,500, less than 10 cents of every dollar, went directly to candidates.

Bogdanoff blames the 2006 gift ban for the rise in lawmaker-controlled slush funds. As a leading lawmaker on tax policy, she said, she is invited to speak to groups around the state, but the gift ban ended the practice of the sponsoring organization underwriting lawmakers' travel costs.

"You can't do that any more unless you're independently wealthy," Bogdanoff said.

Times/Herald Tallahassee Bureau writers Steve Bousquet, Breanne Gilpatrick, Alex Leary, Marc Caputo, Amy Hollyfield, David DeCamp and Mary Ellen Klas contributed to this report.

Cashing in

Florida lawmakers are raking in millions in special interest political contributions through committees of continuing existence. The committees, which are under the control of individual legislators, bypass regular campaign contribution laws and allow lawmakers to steer unlimited donations into the accounts. Activity since Jan. 1, 2007, the start of the 2008 election cycle.

Five committees that raised and spent the most money

Committee	Legislators affiliated with the committee	Amount raised	Amount spent
Preserve the American Dream	Sen. Jeff Atwater	\$902,476	\$599,332

Alliance for a Strong Economy	Sen. JD Alexander, Sen. Carey Baker, Sen. Mike Bennett, Sen. Mike Haridopolos, Sen. Alex Diaz de la Portilla, Sen. Ken Pruitt	\$861,300	\$744,484
Citizens for Housing and Urban Growth	Sen. Mike Bennett, Rep. Ron Reagan	\$481,896	\$442,482
Citizens for Political Accountability	Sen. Dave Aronberg	\$465,504	\$468,818
Leadership for Florida's Future	Rep. Dean Cannon, Rep. Ray Sansom, Rep. Will Weatherford	\$378,250	\$378,250

Biggest contributors

Contributor*	Amount	Industry**	Amount
Hospital Corporation of America	\$269,000	Health care	\$720,931
U.S. Sugar Corp.	\$226,260	Political parties	\$456,500
AT&T	\$151,500	Gaming	\$323,000
Council for Senior Floridians	\$146,000	Real estate	\$281,712
Orange Lake Resort Coalition	\$105,000	Telecommunications	\$276,093

Top groups/committees that receive funds

Group/Company*	Total
Republican Party of Florida	\$858,749
Florida Democratic Party	\$368,410
Free Speech Pac	\$200,000
(All funds from Alliance for a Strong Economy)	
Public Concepts LLC	\$195,813
(Randy Nielsen's consulting firm; all funds from Atwater committees)	
Integrity for Our Families	\$180,000
(All funds from Alliance for a Strong Economy)	

Top uses for funds	Total
Political contributions	\$2,988,981
Consulting	\$1,057,732
Advertising	\$667,654
Travel***	\$203,695
Staff	\$162,853

* Does not include money from other lawmaker committees of continuing existence

** Does not contain money collected from political organizations, political action committees, CCEs and electioneering communication organizations, which donated more than \$925,000; also does not include money donated by contributors who left the occupation field blank

*** Includes expenses listed as travel, airfare, hotel, car rental and travel/food