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League discusses campaign funding, lobby laws

By Kara Nuzback | Mar 22, 2012



Photo by: Kara Nuzback Panelists discuss campaign finance laws at a Delaware League of Women Voters meeting at the Duncan Center in Dover. Shown are (l-r) Lobbyist Richard Heffron, James Browning of Common Cause, former Commissioner of Elections Frank Calio and John Sweeney of the News Journal.

DOVER — Well-funded political-action committees and lackluster transparency laws could make for an interesting election year in Delaware.

Delaware League of Women Voters held a panel discussion March 21 in Dover. About 70 people attended *Disclosure in Delaware: Follow the Money*, to listen to four panelists weigh in on campaign finance, lobbying laws and negative campaigning in the state.

Delaware League of Women Voters President Carol Jones said the event was a chance for the league to improve understanding of major public policy.

Charlotte King, chairwoman of Delaware LWV's Advocacy Corps, said elections should be determined by the quality of candidates, but they are too often determined by campaign funding. "Historically speaking, American elections have always been about money," she said.

In 2010, the U.S. Supreme Court decided federal restrictions on political expenditures by corporations and unions were a violation of the First Amendment. *Citizens United*, a conservative nonprofit, prevailed in the decision against the Federal Election Commission.

Panelist Frank Calio, former Delaware commissioner of elections, said because of the decision, the government will be for sale in the 2012 election, from the federal to the local level.

Calio said super political-action committees often outspend the candidates they support. President Barack Obama rescinded a pledge not to accept campaign funding from super political action committees, he said. "In other words, he folded," Calio said.

Calio said U.S. Sen. Tom Carper, D-Delaware, will have to battle a super PAC in November. *Renew Delaware* is a conservative super PAC dedicated to preventing Carper's reelection. Rehoboth Beach resident Dan Anderson gave \$50,000 to the committee in November 2011, federal election records show.

Calio said when he was commissioner, he supported legislation on campaign finance reform, but the bills never make it through the House. “Status quo was the message,” he said.

Panelist James Browning is regional director of state operations with Common Cause, a nonpartisan citizens advocacy group.

Browning said it is easy for legislators to say they support transparency in government, but officials need to work to fund initiatives to create a more open process.

Browning said undisclosed groups should not be able to destroy a candidate because they have millions of dollars to spend on negative campaigns. “All that work in the community should matter,” he said.

Commissioner of Elections Elaine Manlove said there is sometimes no way to tell who is behind negative campaigning. “Politics is a nasty business,” Manlove said.

Increasing transparency in Delaware

King said in a recent study by the Center for Public Integrity, Global Integrity and Public Radio International, Delaware was ranked 22 out of 50 states for the quality of its transparency laws.

Senate Bill 141 was introduced in the Senate June 23. The legislation would require additional financial reporting, prohibit conflicts of interest and limit unethical conduct for Delaware lobbyists.

Browning said SB 141 is based on Maryland law. “It’s really considered one of the best laws in the country,” he said. “This is the model that’s held up in other states.”

In the Center for Public Integrity study, Maryland was ranked 40th in the nation for its transparency laws, well below Delaware.

Janet Wright, attorney for the state Public Integrity Commission wrote a Feb. 2 letter to President Pro Tem Anthony DeLuca in opposition to the bill. At the event, Wright said SB 141 would eliminate the requirement of some lobbyists to register with her department. “I don’t think that informs the public very well,” she said.

Wright said she administers financial disclosure laws and lobbying laws. She said the legislation would force some lobbyists to pay fees, which she said is anti-Freedom of Speech. “I will stand there until my dying breath and say, ‘I don’t want to charge people for this,’” she said.

Panelist Richard Heffron, senior vice president of government affairs for Delaware Chamber of Commerce, said he has been a lobbyist for 27 years. He said he supports full disclosure of campaign contributions. But, he said, he does not support a proposal that would require lobbyists from private organizations to disclose their salaries. “We are not public employees,” he said.

Heffron said wining and dining doesn’t often cause elected officials to change their position on an issue because ultimately, they work for voters. “I respect people’s positions,” he said. “The greatest thing we have in this democracy is the give and take.”

Rep. Earl Jaques, D-Glasgow, who attended the event, said he appreciates the lobbyists in Legislative Hall. “They have never told me to vote one way or another; they just give information,” he said. “They provide a great service.”

For more information on the panelists and SB 141, visit de.lwv.org.