

LANE COUNTY COMMISSIONER RACES SEE LARGE CONTRIBUTIONS

Special interests, timber, development and labor send big checks to candidates

Money in elections isn't a new phenomenon, especially in Eugene. When current Councilor Emily Semple faced Joshua Skov in 2016, the two broke a record of nearly \$75,000 in contributions from donations of \$1,000 or less.

As the May 15 election gets closer, data from the Oregon Secretary of State webpage on campaign finance activity, ORESTAR, show that large sums of contributions have left a green streak in some county commissioner candidates' war chests.

In Oregon, there are no limits to how much can be contributed to a candidate's campaign, according to an official with the Oregon Secretary of State. Instead, the state assumes voters will keep track of contributions through the agency's webpage on campaign finance activity.

As a result, candidates on the ballot for county commissioner fall into two categories: those who receive significant contributions from a few well-funded sources and those who don't.

Candidates who fit in the first category are all endorsed by the Lane County Republican Party, with the exception of Joe Berney, who's endorsed by the Democratic Party of Lane County.

Former Cottage Grove Mayor and current East Lane Commissioner Gary Williams, who was appointed to the commissioner position in 2017 after Faye Stewart stepped down, has received \$76,786 in contributions, with \$60,000 of that from timber and construction firms. That accounts for 75 percent of his campaign.

From early 2017 to May 5, 2018, West Lane Commissioner Jay Bozievich received \$96,175 in contributions to his campaign. Of that sum, \$80,500 came from timber and development-focused firms. That's 83 percent of his contribution from special interests, which includes \$10,000 from Seneca Jones Timber Company.

Incumbent Springfield Commissioner Sid Leiken told *Eugene Weekly* after his debate with Berney that his contributors are community-based, family-owned businesses. Since January 2017, he's received \$86,900 in contributions, \$77,500 from contributors such as McDougal Bros Investments, Wildish Land Company and \$1,000 from Silver Butte Timber Company of Douglas County. That's 89 percent of his contributions coming from special interests, totaling more than \$1,000.

The average contribution made to Leiken's campaign is \$1,524.

Berney is transparent about his contributions, and says labor unions won't compromise his values because he shares their principles of creating local jobs and development in Lane

County. Since he began his campaign to unseat Leiken, Berney has raised \$82,598, with \$63,200 mostly from labor unions and \$15,000 from Mountain Rose Herbs.

His average contribution is \$1,007.

These contributions exceed those in other county commissioner campaigns. In the East Lane race against Williams, Kevin Matthews has raised \$33,715, with an average contribution of nearly \$300. Heather Buch has received \$43,386, with an average contribution of \$258.

Tim Laue has raised \$3,934, with an average contribution of \$171. James Barber's campaign brought in \$9,702, an average contribution of \$98.

In West Lane, the average contribution to Nora Kent's campaign against Bozievich is a little more than \$500, with large contributions coming from Mountain Rose Herbs and \$3,500 from local labor unions.

South Eugene Commissioner Pete Sorenson says money in politics isn't new but what's getting worse is the magnitude of the contributions, which are done to influence public policy.

"Special interests give money because they want to influence public policy," he says. "The direct tie between campaign money among the incumbent commissioners is they have been delivered on the public policy objective, which is to shut down doing much about the forest spraying."

Sorenson says he's also received money from special interests, and that it does make an impact on public policy.

"Business and special interest groups give money to politicians to influence public policy," he says. "We often lose sight of that. They want the person to win and deliver."

The Lane County Board of Commissioners has delivered on the interests of the timber industry, according to Sorenson.

For example: "The board's discussion of and eventual non-action on the topic of forest pesticides," he says. "You had this huge influx of money from the timber industry in these three races and then you had the board turn a blind eye toward the legitimate request of the public asking that something be done about this particular problem."

Seneca Jones Timber has contributed \$22,500 in the Lane County commissioner race since January 2017. Since March, the company has also contributed \$50,000 to Lou Ogden's campaign for the Bureau of Labor and Industries position.

Commissioners Williams and Bozievich and Seneca were unavailable despite calls for comment.

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