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Get Big Money



Out of Politics!

May 2002

Campaign reform included on special session agenda, is at heart of budget talks

State lawmakers ran out the clock on the legislature's regular session without working out the differences between the competing versions of campaign finance reform passed by the Assembly and Senate. But the leading reform proposal was given new life when it was attached to the budget repair bill and put on the agenda for a special legislative session.

Senate Bill 104, the comprehensive reform bill authored by Neenah Republican Mike Ellis and based on the Voters First plan developed by the Wisconsin Democracy Campaign, was included in the Senate version of the budget adjustment bill addressing the state's \$1.1 billion budget deficit.



Senate and Assembly delegates on the eight-member conference committee have discussed campaign reform at length over the past several weeks and have exchanged proposals, but so far no agreement has been reached.

Political corruption scandal claims first casualty; indictments of top leaders loom on horizon

State Senator Brian Burke, a Milwaukee Democrat who was the leading candidate for state attorney general, dropped out of the race and announced he will not seek re-election to the Senate hours after he was linked to the investigation of illegal campaigning at the Capitol.

Burke's announcement came after he was listed among five lawmakers and 59 legislative staffers who charged the state for legal bills relating to the criminal probe.

Opening the legal fee records to public inspection proved especially embarrassing to Burke, who told a statewide television audience that taxpayers should not pay legislators' legal bills on the same day he met with an attorney whose firm later billed taxpayers \$9,497 on Burke's behalf.

After the legal fee payments became public, WDC's executive director told the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, "Burke is merely the first casualty of the scandal. He won't be the last. There will be others who fall, and that could reach all the way up to the top echelons of leadership." WDC has called on Assembly Speaker Scott Jensen and Senate Majority Leader Chuck Chvala to resign. The records show Jensen and Chvala are central targets of the investigation.

Our democracy, our airwaves

The Wisconsin Democracy Campaign has joined a new national campaign to promote free air time for candidates as the next step in campaign finance reform after the McCain-Feingold bill outlawing so-called soft money donations was passed by Congress and signed by President Bush.

“Banning soft money cuts off one of the biggest supply routes for special interest money. But it doesn’t do anything to reduce the demand for political money. Running ads has become so expensive that if candidates want to get their message out to voters they have no choice but to sell their souls to the wealthiest special interests,” WDC executive director Mike McCabe said. “The next step is to get at the root causes of the political arms race.



It’s no mystery that the chief cause of the rapidly escalating cost of campaigning is the price of buying air time.”

WDC will lead the Free Air Time Coalition’s efforts in Wisconsin. The coalition is made up of over 50 national groups – including AARP, the AFL-CIO, Common Cause, the League of Women Voters, the NAACP, National Education Association, Sierra Club, the National Council of Churches and Youth Vote Coalition – and scores of state and local civic organizations.

In 2002, WDC and its coalition partners will host forums across the state to discuss the free air time issue and will be collecting signatures on a declaration of support for free air time.

More information about the campaign is available on WDC’s web site – www.wisdc.org – or on the national coalition’s site – www.FreeAirTime.org.

To get involved in this national grassroots effort, call the WDC office toll-free at **1-888-455-2560** or e-mail us at wisdc@wisdc.org.

Free air time coalition grows

Since the Wisconsin Democracy Campaign announced in April that it was joining the national Free Air Time Coalition, 18 state-level advocacy groups have joined the effort WDC is leading in Wisconsin.

Other members of the Wisconsin coalition include:

Common Cause in Wisconsin
League of Women Voters of Wisconsin
AARP
Coalition of Wisconsin Aging Groups
Wisconsin State AFL-CIO
Wisconsin Citizen Action
Sierra Club – John Muir Chapter
Wisconsin Council on Children and Families
Wisconsin Public Interest Research Group
Citizens’ Utility Board
National Farmers Organization – Wisconsin
Wisconsin Federation of Teachers
Wisconsin Retired Educators’ Association
American Association of University Women – WI
Lutheran Office for Public Policy in Wisconsin
Clean Water Action Council
Wisconsin Coalition for Advocacy
Wisconsin Interfaith IMPACT

Sign the free air declaration!

You can give the campaign for free air time for candidates a major boost by adding your name to the national declaration of support. It’s easy too -- you can sign the declaration online. The web address is <http://freeairtime.org/docs/index.php?DocID=12>.

The Free Air Time Coalition’s goal is to collect 100,000 signatures nationwide so that the next time the issue comes up in Washington, members of Congress won’t just hear from the broadcast industry, they’ll know ordinary citizens care about this issue, too.

Please take a minute to sign the declaration. And you can help even more by collecting signatures at home, at work and at community gatherings. You can download a printable version of the declaration at <http://freeairtime.org/freeairtime/declaration.pdf>.

Mail completed forms to the Wisconsin Democracy Campaign, 210 North Bassett Street, Suite 215, Madison, WI 53703 or fax them to 608-255-4359.

From the executive director

The case for free air time

In our democracy, speech is supposed to be free but in fact has become outrageously expensive – especially during the campaign season.

If you're a candidate who can't write a big check to the local television station for a nightly bombardment of ads, you still have your freedom of speech. But you don't have much chance to be heard – or elected.

When money dictates which candidates can shout and which can only whisper, voters are deprived of the contest of ideas and range of choices that elections are supposed to be all about. And once the election is over, we're left with leaders who are more beholden to their contributors than to their constituents.

One place to look for remedies is broadcast television. The cost of those 30-second TV ads is the biggest reason campaigns have become so expensive.

The public owns the airwaves, and broadcasters get free licenses to operate on those airwaves on the condition that they serve the public interest. During

Free air time would open up the political marketplace to those currently priced out of it.

the campaign season, broadcasters turn around and sell access to these airwaves at inflated prices (check out WDC's report, "Gouging Democracy in Wisconsin," available online at <http://www.wisdc.org/gougdemreport.html>). In turn, many candidates sell access to the government in order to raise special interest money to buy TV ads.

It's a wonderful arrangement for the broadcasters, who reap windfall profits from political campaigns. It's a good system for the incumbent politicians, who prosper in the political culture of paid speech. And it's great for the special interests who get policy favors in return for the campaign cash they supply. But it's a lousy deal for the rest of us.

Campaign finance reform efforts in recent years have focused on proposals that reduce the *supply* of politica

political money – by banning "soft money" donations to political parties, for example. But to get at the root causes of the problems plaguing our system, reforms must reduce the *demand* for political money as well. Free air time for candidates would do just that.

Free air time would go a long way toward opening up the political marketplace to those currently priced out of it. It would slow down the political money chase and reduce the influence of special interests over our elected officials. And it would provide the public with a fair return on the airwaves we own.

— Mike McCabe

VICTORY!

WDC wins emergency Elections Board rule on donor disclosure

At its May 22 meeting, the state Elections Board adopted an emergency rule requiring candidates to file their campaign finance reports electronically to give citizens quicker access to information about donations candidates receive.

The Board acted to finally implement the four-year-old "Citizens Right to Know" law under threat of a lawsuit by the Wisconsin Democracy Campaign.

The electronic disclosure law was enacted in 1998 and was supposed to be implemented by July 1999. The Elections Board never implemented it, leaving Wisconsin as one of only a few states without a system giving the public electronic access to the campaign finance reports candidates are required to file.

WDC and the advocacy group Wisconsin Citizen Action hired a law firm in January to seek a court order, and the Board responded by agreeing to adopt the emergency rule.

The new rule will require an estimated 300 candidates who receive or spend \$20,000 or more to file their upcoming July reports on a computer disk using specified software.

What's on the web

The Wisconsin Democracy Campaign's award-winning web site – www.wisdc.org – features the state's only searchable database of campaign contributors, plus a storehouse of news, special reports, legislative updates and more.



A recent WDC report available online is *Hey Bidder, Bidder...The Sequel*, a study of how campaign contributions became a big-donor protection program during the state budget crisis. Despite the \$1.1 billion state budget deficit, lawmakers refused to reconsider nearly \$500 million worth of special interest tax breaks and pork barrel spending tucked in the original budget and added at least \$49 million in new tax breaks and policy favors in the budget repair bill. The link to the report is <http://www.wisdc.org/heybidder2title.html>.

The database of campaign donors has just been updated with information from the most recently filed candidate reports. And there are freshly updated candidate profiles, and newly entered information on political action committee activity. All this is available in the "Follow the Money" section of the web site (<http://www.wisdc.org/WDCFTMPg.html>).

Another popular feature of WDC's Internet home page is the caucus scandal archive, the most comprehensive source of information on the political scandal that has rocked the State Capitol that you'll find anywhere. The link is http://www.wisdc.org/caucus_index.html.

Visitors to the web site now can sign up for e-mail updates that bring them breaking news on legislative developments, action alerts and the latest research on campaign finance issues.



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