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Get Big Money



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Momentum building for court election reform

At a March 30 town hall meeting in Green Bay organized by the Democracy Campaign as part of its Judicial Independence Project, Assembly Majority Leader Tom Nelson told the audience that public hearings would be held within weeks on the Impartial Justice bill overhauling state Supreme Court elections and the reform measure would likely be taken up by the full Assembly before the state budget process is concluded. The state budget is supposed to be finalized by June 30.

Assembly Elections and Campaign Reform Committee chairman Jeff Smith made similar remarks at a March 26 community forum in Eau Claire.

In late January, Senate Majority Leader Russ Decker issued a statement saying two of the first proposals the upper house would act on in the 2009-2010 session are the Impartial Justice bill (Senate Bill 40 and Assembly Bill 65) and legislation requiring full disclosure of special interest electioneering (SB 43 and AB 63) that also is strongly backed by the Democracy Campaign.

Add your voice to those supporting reform of Supreme Court elections by signing the petition enclosed in this issue of the *Big Money Bulletin* and gathering signatures from friends and neighbors as well.



Justice Bradley to headline Democracy Campaign annual membership meeting

Wisconsin Supreme Court Justice Ann Walsh Bradley will be the featured speaker at the May 19 annual membership meeting of the Wisconsin Democracy Campaign.

A native of Richland Center, Justice Bradley was elected to the Supreme Court in 1995 and was reelected in 2005. She was a high school teacher before entering the University of Wisconsin Law School. She was in private practice until becoming a circuit court judge in Marathon County in 1985.

The meeting will run from 4 p.m. to 6:30 p.m. in Tripp Commons in the University of Wisconsin-Madison's Memorial Union. For more information, see page 3.

Events held throughout state to highlight need for judicial reform

The Democracy Campaign's Judicial Independence Project hit high gear in February, March and April with town hall meetings and other public forums crisscrossing the state. One was held in Eau Claire, three in Green Bay, three in Milwaukee, and one



each in Janesville, La Crosse, Lake Mills, Madison, Mazomanie and Waunakee.

Upcoming events include community forums on back-to-

back days in May in Hayward and Ashland. The Hayward forum is scheduled for May 7 in the Veterans Community Center from 6 p.m. to 8 p.m. The May 8 event in Ashland will be held at Northland College at a time to be determined.

The aim of the Judicial Independence Project is to build awareness of growing special interest influence over state Supreme Court elections and generate support for election reforms.

The project's Web site, www.impartialjustice.org, features information on events around the state, brochures that can be downloaded and printed, and an online petition.

Midwest groups urge Obama to push national campaign reforms

The Democracy Campaign and 22 other groups that are part of the Midwest Democracy Network sent a letter to President Obama in late March calling on him to "use the full powers of the White House" to make two major federal campaign reforms a reality.

The Fair Elections Now Act sponsored by Illinois Democrat Dick Durbin and Pennsylvania Republican Arlen Specter overhauls congressional elections with a mix of public financing and incentives for small donations. The Presidential Funding Act sponsored by Wisconsin Democrat Russ Feingold and Maine Republican Susan Collins revamps the antiquated presidential public financing system.

President Obama co-sponsored both bills when he served in the U.S. Senate. To read the groups' letter, go to www.wisdc.org/pr033109.php.

State sunshine laws found lacking

Depression-era Supreme Court Justice Louis Brandeis famously said "sunshine is the best disinfectant." Indeed, good sunshine laws are the citizenry's first line of defense when it comes to keeping government clean, open and honest.

A top-to-bottom assessment of open government laws in Wisconsin and four other Midwest states prepared for the Midwest Democracy Network (www.midwestdemocracynetwork.org) revealed some conspicuous shortcomings in Wisconsin's public records and open meetings laws.

The report was issued in recognition of Sunshine Week (March 15-21). The Democracy Campaign is a founding member of the Midwest Democracy Network.

While the study found that Wisconsin's open government laws are comparatively strong overall and penalties for violations are substantial, identified weaknesses include the lack of an administrative appeals process to resolve disputes. This leaves citizens and groups with no alternative but expensive

Illinois and Michigan have firm deadlines for responding to public requests for government records. Wisconsin does not.

and cumbersome litigation if access to public records or meetings is denied.

Other problems with the state's sunshine laws include:

- The lack of firm deadlines for responding to information requests. Laws in Illinois and Michigan, for example, set explicit deadlines governing how much time government agencies have to respond to requests for public records. Wisconsin law does not.
- Exorbitant fees that government agencies can charge for simply locating public records. These fees are in addition to charges assessed for reproduction of records.
- Only 24 hours notice of public meeting is required by law, hindering the public's ability to prepare and organize to attend meetings. Meeting minutes are required to provide only a record of motions and roll call votes.

WDC flags major problems with state's online reporting system

Over the last two months, the Democracy Campaign exposed serious inadequacies in the state's new electronic campaign finance reporting system and illustrated in two recent reports how data on the system's Web site (cfis.wi.gov) cannot be trusted.

A WDC review of about four dozen campaign finance reports posted on the system, including filings by Governor Jim Doyle and Attorney General J.B. Van Hollen, found that nearly all of them contained incorrect information.

Those findings issued in March came about a month after the Democracy Campaign found major glitches in reports filed in the new system by two political party committees and two Assembly candidates.

Democracy Campaign director Mike McCabe testified March 30 to the state Government Accountability Board about the problems and specifically raised concerns about more than five dozen candidate reports that were supposed to be available for public review at the end of January but were still nowhere to be found on the new state Web site two months later.

State board OKs reform agenda

At the end of March the state Government Accountability Board endorsed an 11-item package of reforms strengthening laws regulating ethics, lobbying and campaign financing. Many of the items have been long sought by the Democracy Campaign.

Among the recommendations are calls to:

- Eliminate the "home court advantage" for legislators allowing them to be prosecuted for civil and criminal offenses in their home counties rather than where they were committed, as is the case for citizens who hold no public office.
- Bar executive branch employees from soliciting campaign contributions and sponsoring fundraisers.
- Give the board more authority to make public the findings of investigations.
- Prohibit lobbyists from indirectly giving anything of value to a state official through intermediaries.
- Make it easier for the public to view public officials' statements of economic interest.

Interest group spending passes \$1 million mark in 2 spring races

In a telling commentary on the level of special interest group interference in the 2007 and 2008 spring elections, political insiders regarded outside group activity in this spring's elections to be minimal despite the fact that combined spending by two left-leaning organizations exceeded \$1 million.

Wisconsin Education Association Council, the state's largest teachers union, alone outspent – for the first time – candidates for state school superintendent by a considerable margin. The liberal Greater Wisconsin Committee also spent nearly a half million dollars in support of state Supreme Court Chief Justice Shirley Abrahamson.

WDC annual meeting May 19

In addition to keynote remarks by state Supreme Court Justice Ann Walsh Bradley, the agenda for the Democracy Campaign's May 19 annual membership meeting will feature an organizational restructuring plan that will be presented to members for approval as well as the board of directors election.

When the Democracy Campaign was founded in 1995, the group's initial application for tax-exempt status under section 501(c)(3) of the Internal Revenue Code was not approved. The group was organized under section 501(c)(4) as the Wisconsin Democracy Campaign and a short time later a renewed application under section 501(c)(3) was approved for the Wisconsin Democracy Campaign Education Project.

While less than ideal from an accounting and administrative standpoint, WDC has operated under the dual organization structure for more than 10 years. Evolving IRS policies and tax forms make the structure increasingly undesirable in WDC's case, however.

WDC's board voted unanimously April 1 to recommend to the full membership a restructuring plan that dissolves the 501(c)(4) organization and transfers both its name and its membership to the 501(c)(3) group. That organization, which will take on the name Wisconsin Democracy Campaign, will carry on all of the work both entities previously did. Contributions to the Wisconsin Democracy

Last word

Brother, can you spare some news?

The newspaper industry is in trouble. Deep, deep trouble. Barely a week passes without yet another announcement of a paper suspending print publication or going out of business altogether. The company that owns newspaper icons like the *Los Angeles Times* and *Chicago Tribune* is in bankruptcy.

Even the storied *New York Times* is said to be seriously considering going out of print and publishing only online. Closer to home, there is growing talk of the same fate visiting the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*.

Some of what plagues the newspaper industry is self-inflicted. Some of it has to do with forces beyond the industry's control. Regardless of who's to blame, the business model newspapers were built on is collapsing. Newspapers are going the way of the dinosaur. What's scary is that newspapers have been so central to the

fabric of American journalism that if newspapers die then journalism is in mortal peril as well.

As our world grows relentlessly digital, life without newspapers has gone from unfathomable to a near certainty in a breathtakingly short time. Hard as it is to imagine, maybe we all can learn to do without newspapers. But this much I know. We can't do without journalism. Not and have a democracy.

We have to figure out how to sustain journalism. Maybe the news industry needs to say goodbye to Wall Street and enter the nonprofit world. Maybe we need public investments in news. There's a National Endowment for the Arts and a National Science Foundation. Maybe there needs to be such a thing for journalism. Or perhaps news should be a public utility since it is as integral to our lives as electricity. Wherever the answer lies, we have to find it.

— Mike McCabe



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