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**Capitol View**

**Commentary by J.L. Schmidt**

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**Campaign Spending in Nebraska Out of Control**

I’m struggling with the math on this one.

At least 20 people running for the Nebraska Legislature are spending $100,000 or more on their campaigns. The job, if they get it, pays $12,000 a year plus a per diem that barely covers gas and living expenses for the time they spend in Lincoln for either the 60-day or 90-day legislative session. Where is the return on the investment?

“You can’t put a price on power,” said Creighton University political scientist Richard Witmer.

Witmer, retired University of Nebraska at Omaha political scientist Paul Landow, Gavin Geis of Common Cause Nebraska -- which advocates for limits on campaign contributions – and others told the Nebraska Examiner that Nebraska now mirrors the national trend. “The question is when does this stop? When does it plateau?” Geis asked.

That fundraising will continue to climb, he said, as long as the Legislature maintains the status quo for political fundraising, with no caps on donations and few rules.  Voters, he said, lose the ability to elect leaders who represent and reflect their communities as the cost of running increases.

A 1993 Nebraska law tried to balance the scales by setting a voluntary spending limit. Once a candidate eclipsed that level, the state offered public money to competing campaigns that raised and spent less. Under the law, legislative races were capped at a certain level, and few candidates bucked the limit. The Nebraska Supreme Court tossed out the law in 2012, however, and campaign spending has risen dramatically since then.

Geis said state senators could legislate limits on individual and group donations that would pass constitutional muster. But, former State Sen. Scott Lautenbaugh, a Republican who tried to repeal the limitations act when he was in the Legislature, said he preferred increasing

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public disclosure of who is donating funds and not setting spending limits because caps encroach on people’s “freedom of speech.”

As the cost of running increases, voters lose the ability to elect leaders who represent and reflect their communities as the cost of running increases. Would you rather have a nonpartisan citizen legislator with a calling to serve, or a power-hungry politician who just spent ten times what the job is worth just to get elected?

By mid-June this year, Nebraska campaigns and political committees had raised a record $51 million on state and local races, according to the Nebraska Accountability and Disclosure Commission. That’s more than double the old record of $23 million just two years ago. It’s nearly seven times the recent low of $7 million raised for those races in 2012.

Nebraska’s costliest-ever GOP primary for governor this year drove the newest numbers. Nearly $28 million was raised, powered by agribusinessman Charles Herbster’s $13 million, University of Nebraska Regent Jim Pillen’s $10 million and State Sen. Brett Lindstrom’s $3 million.

Of course, political spending by Gov. Pete Ricketts and his family added up. They gave nearly $2 million to Conservative Nebraska, an outside group that hammered both of Pillen’s top GOP opponents.

The governor also helped fund groups spending on other races, including the Nebraska Future Action Fund, which is spending on a University of Nebraska regent’s race and others.

Two well-funded ballot initiatives are adding another boost to the numbers. Efforts to require voters to show ID and to raise the minimum wage have generated about $2 million apiece.

Ricketts’ mother, Marlene, funded much of the Voter ID effort. Donors to the minimum wage effort include Nebraska Appleseed, labor unions and a national progressive group, Sixteen Thirty Fund.

Experts point out that campaign advertising has become more expensive as political consultants charge more. Term limits have created more open-seat races on which both parties

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compete and spend more. High-dollar donors are competing with each other for influence and dark money groups, which shield their donors’ identities, are attracting more funds.

“It gets more and more expensive every year,” Landow said. “It’s not good for American democracy.”

Enough said.

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*J.L. Schmidt has been covering Nebraska government and politics since 1979. He has been a registered Independent for more than 20 years*.