

# Mix of money, politics potent

■ A study shows that local and state election officials often can't check campaign finance reports thoroughly.

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**GREENSBORO** — Thousands of dollars for TV and print advertising.

Thousands more for a website.

It's \$4,000 for 1,000 yard signs, \$300 per 1,000 door hangers, \$500 for 250 buttons or refrigerator magnets.

The cost of seeking public office runs high. So, it's no wonder candidates from city hall to Congress seek campaign contributions.

"If we were to eliminate contributions, you would be limiting candidates to the very wealthy," said Mike Barber, the most successful fundraiser among six candidates running for at-large seats on the Greensboro City Council.

But critics say that while money might be the mother's milk of politics, after the election it can be toxic to good government.

Just under \$250,000 in con-

tributions flowed into coffers of the winning Greensboro City Council candidates in the recent primary, and more is on the way in the run-up to the Nov. 5 general election.

Newly minted and re-elected officials will face outright accusations or, more frequently, behind-the-scenes grumbling that they voted a certain way only because of who gave them money in the last race.

"I didn't want to buy the election, and I didn't want to be bought," said George Hartzman, a Greensboro mayoral candidate who es-

chewed contributions and was eliminated in the Oct. 8 primary.

He says it was worth it, but at the same time acknowledges his candidacy suffered for lack of money.

Hartzman wants Greensboro to ban contributions from professionals, such as developers and lawyers, who "have or may receive city contracts or monies" from the council in the year immediately before or after a council election.

Barber and other candi-

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# Money

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dates who accept campaign donations counter that their votes are not for sale. It's a simplistic, inaccurate view of government that suggests an officeholder would sell his or her soul for a few hundred bucks in contributions, Barber said.

Other would-be reformers aim these days not at further clamps on contributors to local and state candidates, but at shining more light on who gave how much to whom, so voters make informed choices.

A recent study by the League of Women Voters of the Piedmont Triad found state and local election officials swamped by the volume of campaign-finance reports: The sheer number left them unable to adequately review the reports in detail.

The group's research turned up errors in Guilford County races that went back several years and were corrected after officials were alerted.

"For most of these things, (the reports) are not getting a detailed examination and there's little in the way of cross-auditing," said Greensboro resident

Walter Salinger, who led the league's study. "I think people should be surprised that it's almost on the honor system."

The law allows donors to contribute up to \$4,000 per candidate or political committee in each election cycle — meaning that a contributor may give up to \$12,000 to a candidate in a race that includes a primary, a runoff and a general election.

In local races, large contributors usually give in increments of \$100 to \$500.

Donations must come from an individual or political committee, not a business. Donors remain anonymous until they go over \$50 at any point in an election cycle that includes a primary, a runoff if needed, and a general election.

Election law evolves over time. And the most recent session of the General Assembly made changes loosening several campaign-finance rules.

Legislators enacted them this summer without much debate in a bill that drew most public attention for its requirement that after 2015, voters must display a photo ID before casting their ballots.

Under other terms of the new law, the limit on con-

tributions goes up 25 percent to \$5,000 in January, and then increases automatically every two years in step with inflation.

Changes also allow unlimited spending by interest groups not tied directly to a candidate, with no requirement they reveal the source of their funds during much of the election cycle.

That enables the use of "secret money" to launch attack ads against a favored candidate's opponent, said Bob Hall, director of the voting-rights advocacy group, Democracy North Carolina.

Hall views the new law as part of a trend making it more difficult for the average person to vote, while "they increase the access and influence of special interests and wealthy donors."

Existing law requires treasurers for candidates and political committees to report the name, address and occupation of their contributors, in addition to the amount of each contribution.

Campaign and committee treasurers often are volunteers with varying levels of financial training, and they're supposed to pay close attention to every penny moving through

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**Keith Brown,**

a local election watchdog, about errors found in campaign finance reports

their bank accounts.

"Every donation, whether \$1 or \$500, has to be recorded by their name and occupation," said Bill Knight, a retired CPA and former Greensboro mayor who volunteers as treasurer for the Guilford County Republican Party.

Knight also is running for a seat on the City Council.

The council is a nonpartisan board, so political parties are not overtly involved in its elections.

James Bowles, Knight's counterpart for the county Democratic Party, said reporting software supplied by state government makes accurate reporting much easier by, for example, keeping a running total of each contributor's donations so they are properly identified once their

contributions pass the \$50 threshold.

"Right now, we're in a fundraising event and I probably spend several hours at a time on it," said Bowles, who has been the local Democratic party's treasurer for seven years.

But the attention to detail by some campaign treasurers, or lack of it, bothers local election watchdog Keith Brown, who keeps track of campaign financing on his Triad Watch blog.

Brown unearthed reporting errors this year by several council candidates that required them to file "amended" reports with the Guilford County Board of Elections.

"How hard is it to fill out the name, address, what you do for a living and where you work?" Brown asked.

Brown agrees with a finding in the League's report that questioned the large number of anonymous contributions under \$50 reported by local political parties in the 2012 elections.

The league's Salinger wrote that when the volume of small contributions reaches such high levels, it threatens to defeat the purpose of campaign-finance disclosure.

Guilford County Elections Director Charlie Collicutt said his office's main role must be ensuring elections that are run smoothly, accurately and fairly. But the staff puts increasing emphasis on posting campaign-finance reports online quickly after they are filed, reviewing them for accuracy and working with candidates to correct errors and missing information.

Local elections officials can ask pointed questions of candidates, but only the State Board of Elections wields the power to launch a full-fledged inquiry and impose penalties on candidates who are not in compliance, Collicutt said.

The crux of the matter still comes down to one thing, Collicutt added, no matter how sophisticated the reporting technology gets nor how low legislators set the dollar-amount for identifying contributors by name.

"All of the fixes we talk about still rely on candidates keeping accurate records," he said. "If candidates fail to disclose, that's a very hard thing to uncover."

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