

Iowa Politics Roundup: Romney, Pawlenty Start Building Iowa Bankrolls

Written by Lynn Campbell
Friday, 23 July 2010 14:38

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New reports filed with the Iowa Ethics & Campaign Disclosure Board show two potential 2012 Republican presidential contenders are starting to fill the bank accounts of their Iowa-based political action committees.

Former Massachusetts Governor Mitt Romney's Free & Strong America PAC-Iowa raised \$81,600 from eight out-of-state donors from May 15 to July 14, spent \$81,784, and had \$50,816 at the close of the reporting period.

Romney's \$81,784 in PAC expenditures don't show money being given directly to Iowa candidates, but instead show money paid for salary and gratuity, consultant services, professional fees, office supplies, printing and reproduction, travel, headquarter expenses, postage, shipping, and delivery. David Kochel of Des Moines is the PAC's treasurer.

A report filed with the Federal Election Commission showed that Romney's national Free & Strong America PAC has contributed \$17,500 to Iowa campaigns, including \$10,000 to Republican gubernatorial nominee (and former Governor) Terry Branstad, \$5,000 to U.S. Senator Chuck Grassley, and \$2,500 to Republican Third Congressional District candidate Brad Zaun of Urbandale.

Minnesota Governor Tim Pawlenty's Freedom First PAC-Iowa raised \$32,500 from three out-of-state donors in its first month, spent \$6,100, and had \$26,400 left to spend.

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Expenditures showed that Pawlenty had not yet donated to individual Iowa candidates with his Iowa PAC, but instead spent the money on consulting. He paid \$3,500 to the McGill Consulting Group LLC of Bloomington, Minnesota; \$2,000 to Compliance Consulting Co. of Virginia LLC of McLean, Virginia, and \$600 to Engage LLC of Washington, D.C.

However, a report filed with the Federal Election Commission showed that Pawlenty's national Freedom First PAC contributed \$2,400 to Grassley's campaign in March. Pawlenty will return to Iowa July 31 to August 2 to campaign for Republican legislative candidates.

National Governors Associations Play Key Role in Iowa's Gubernatorial Race

The Republican Governors Association (RGA) and Democratic Governors Association (DGA) are playing a key role in Iowa's gubernatorial race this year, both pouring in more than \$1 million to back their candidates and easily becoming the largest financial backers of the expensive top-of-the-ticket race that's garnered national attention.

"Terry Branstad is about the best candidate we could possibly ever hope for," said Tim Murtaugh, director of political communications for the Republican Governors Association, when asked why the RGA was investing so heavily in Iowa. "He's a guy with great experience, a tremendous record, a great leader who's still very popular in Iowa. Again, he'd make a great governor. We're just thrilled that he decided to run."

Campaign finance reports filed this week show that the RGA contributed \$1 million to Branstad in the last six weeks, with checks of \$500,000 on June 10, \$250,000 on July 9, and \$250,000 on July 14. The money accounts for about 18 percent of the \$5.6 million that Branstad has raised from 11,700 donors since the campaign's inception last October.

Meanwhile, Democratic Governor Chet Culver's top donation in the past six weeks was a \$250,000 check on July 14 from the DGA, which gave him \$500,000 last year and \$750,000 earlier this year. The \$1.5 million in contributions account for about 23 percent of the \$6.6 million his campaign said it has raised since the beginning of the gubernatorial campaign.

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"We certainly believe very strongly in Governor Culver," said Emily DeRose, communications director for the Democratic Governors Association. "Governor Culver is a strong incumbent. We think he has done right by the people of Iowa. He has made tough decisions in some tough times."

Those dollar figures don't include the \$782,500 the Democratic Governors Association gave to the 527 organization called Iowans for Responsible Government (led by former Iowa Democratic Party Chair Rob Tully), which used the money to run attack ads against Branstad before the primary election.

Murtaugh said the RGA is not spending money in all 37 states with governor's races, but tries to spend money where it can make an impact and help a candidate win. The RGA has already been on television in eight states.

The Democratic Governors Association has contributed to candidates across the country and has also advertised directly and been active in states including Ohio, Rhode Island, California, Nevada, and Illinois.

Northey Tops Executive Council in Campaign Cash

Republican Iowa Agriculture Secretary Bill Northey has accumulated \$294,595 in his campaign war chest, a total that's higher than any other member of the state Executive Council outside of Culver, according to a report filed with the Iowa Ethics & Campaign Disclosure Board.

Northey raised \$83,380 in the past six weeks and spent \$35,312, leaving him with a total of \$294,595. That compares with Democratic Attorney General Tom Miller's \$225,495, Republican State Auditor David Vaudt's \$137,746, Democratic Secretary of State Michael Mauro's \$136,897, and Democratic State Treasurer Michael Fitzgerald's \$122,740.

Northey's fundraising and campaign cash far surpass Democratic opponent Francis Thicke, a Fairfield organic dairy farmer who took in \$8,101 this past reporting period, spent \$18,523, and had \$21,771 at the end of the reporting period.

Unemployment Stays Steady

Iowa's seasonally adjusted unemployment rate remained at 6.8 percent in June, and compared with 6.0 percent for the same month one year ago.

"The June nonfarm employment figure is higher than one year ago, indicating that some progress has been made toward a recovery," said Elisabeth Buck, director of Iowa Workforce Development. "Iowa is headed in the right direction, but hiring will need to gain strength to substantially lower the state's unemployment rate."

The state's pool of unemployed workers decreased slightly to 113,600 in June from 114,800 in May. The number of unemployed was reported at 99,500 in June 2009.

Nationally, the U.S. jobless rate for June dropped to 9.5 percent, from 9.7 percent in May. Hiring in June at both the statewide and national levels was affected by the government's cutting of temporary census workers and weak consumer spending.

"Iowa's economy is still soft," said IPP research associate Noga O'Connor. "While nonfarm jobs dropped for the month, the trends over the last six months and the full year are encouraging. In addition, the state's unemployment rate at 6.8 percent in June remains significantly below the national rate of 9.5 percent, and held below the 23-year high of 6.9 percent in April."

O'Connor said Iowa's job picture remains muddled by losses in the private sector -- including 4,200 in trade, transportation, and utilities in June alone. "We must recognize that public-sector jobs are a critical lifeline for the economy when the private sector cannot deliver," he said. "This is not a time to cut back in public-sector jobs."

Ed Board Set to Adopt National Standards

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Iowa's State Board of Education is expected to adopt national education standards at a July 29 meeting in Marshalltown, following the lead of 27 states that have adopted them and about a dozen more that are expected to do so in the next two weeks.

"We agree with this initiative," Elaine Watkins-Miller, a spokesperson for the Iowa Department of Education, told IowaPolitics.com. "Iowa students are no longer competing just with their fellow Iowa residents. They're obviously competing nationally and internationally with students. We need to have standards that allow us to really look across the nation."

Watkins-Miller said there are many similarities between the new national standards and those in the Iowa Core Curriculum, which identifies essential concepts and skills for kindergarten through 12th grade in literacy, mathematics, science, social studies, and 21st Century skills.

And she maintained that the national standards wouldn't take away Iowa's local control. "People sometimes think about standards and think that's the whole discussion," she said, but standards must be combined with curriculum and assessment. "That curriculum is still locally controlled. They have to meet those standards but how they do that ... is really still up to that local control."

States that adopt the national standards by August 2 will win points on their applications to the Race to the Top federal grant program, which will award \$3.4 billion in September. Iowa is competing for up to \$175 million in its second application.

Legislators See Progress at IASB but Will Continue Review

The Iowa Association of School Boards (IASB) is moving in the right direction, Senator Rich Olive said during a meeting of the Government Oversight Committee, but the four-hour meeting will not be the last time members of the group are asked to appear before lawmakers.

"It is our job to demand answers for Iowa taxpayers," said Olive, a Story City Democrat and co-chair of the committee. "The audit we will be hearing about today is for Fiscal Year '09 -- not

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Fiscal Year '10, the past year when the most major issues were discovered."

Co-chair and Representative Vicki Lensing (D-Iowa City) said she expects the committee to meet again in November, as an audit of the organization for Fiscal Year 2010 is expected to be completed in September.

Among the things lawmakers will consider, Lensing said, are further regulation on not-for-profit groups, training requirements for board members, and possible policies on whistleblowers, travel expenses, and credit cards.

"Unfortunately I don't think this will be the last meeting on this subject, and I think as a committee we need to look at what legislation needs to be passed so something like this doesn't happen again," Lensing said.

Lawmakers had strong words for the IASB following the group's July 14 meeting, which was open to the public for the first time. The group released its Fiscal Year 2009 audit at that point, which revealed no "smoking guns other than what we reported," according to auditor Ted Lodden.

But lawmakers took issue with the tone of the meeting. IASB board members complained about the amount of time it takes to answer questions, and legislators questioned the rehiring of Richard Vande Kieft as treasurer and the underlying issues some said still exist at the association.

IASB Executive Director Veronica Stalker said that while she understands why the committee is upset, she was disturbed by Olive's remarks. She also noted that the board has had no problems with complying with open-records laws.

"We are taking this issue extremely seriously," Stalker said. "We believe we've taken action and are putting policies and interim controls in place in response to every recommendation. Did it take us some time? Yes. Has it cost us some money? Yes. Has it kept us from moving forward as quickly as we'd like? Perhaps. But I hope the message you will hear from us is we are taking

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this extremely seriously."

Representative Kurt Swaim (D-Bloomfield) said an underlying issue that must be addressed is the role of the IASB board.

"As I've listened to all the testimony, I have felt that the board was a rubber stamp of what was happening. And that may not be fair, but that is my assessment based on everything I've heard," Swaim said. "Have you taken any actions to prevent the present board being a rubber stamp to the management and executive director?"

Representative Ralph Watts (R-Adel) said Republicans are on the same page as Democrats in terms of trying to prevent future situations similar to the IASB's. "We will support any legislation that's necessary that comes out of this committee that will deal with the issues we've been faced with as a part of this meeting," he said.

And Representative Clel Baudler (R-Greenfield), a retired state trooper, said it's clear to him that former Executive Director Maxine Kilcrease and former Chief Financial Officer Kevin Schick "have been running some type of a criminal enterprise" and asked about the involvement of law enforcement.

"I say there's criminal charges to be brought against them," Baudler said. "I know that several law-enforcement agencies are looking at this, but I for one am not going to forget this."

This weekly summary comes from IowaPolitics.com, an online government and politics news service. Reporter Andrew Duffelmeyer and other correspondents contributed to this report.