

Corporate cash ready to roll into Minnesota elections

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Corporations can use profits to create a pitch supporting or opposing politicians.

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A new political organization, backed by two of the state's most powerful business interests and led by one of Gov. Tim Pawlenty's top deputies, could result in a powerful wave of corporate cash in this year's state elections.

Brian McClung, Pawlenty's deputy chief of staff and spokesman, said Wednesday that he will leave his post to head MN Forward, an organization that will serve as the vehicle for the Minnesota Business Partnership and the state Chamber of Commerce to weigh in on the 2010 elections.

The group could exert unprecedented influence in the upcoming election. A landmark U.S. Supreme Court ruling this year opened the door to a far greater political role for corporations by allowing them to fund advertising blitzes for or against individual candidates.

In a hint to their potential impact, MN Forward leaders hope to raise at least \$2 million, from small businesses to corporate behemoths like 3M. That's at least four times what the chamber raised in other years from individual contributions.

MN Forward will work "with a broad coalition of Minnesota job creators to elect candidates from both parties who support policies that enhance job growth in Minnesota," said David Olson, chamber president.

Not everyone likes the new rules.

"This is a new infusion of corporate campaign cash, but it will be spent to protect the same misguided priorities," said state Rep. Ryan Winkler, DFL-Golden Valley, an advocate of greater disclosure of corporate spending.

MN Forward will focus on helping legislative and statewide candidates committed to the group's vision of economic growth and ideas for improving education, such as alternative teacher licensure, charter schools and tying teacher pay to performance.

McClung, who is starting his own public relations outfit, will leave his \$103,000-a-year state job at the end of the week to direct MN Forward through the election.

McClung declined to talk about MN Forward while still working for the state. Before joining Pawlenty's staff, McClung was the government affairs director for the Twin West Chamber of Commerce. He also managed the group's political-action committee.

Charlie Weaver, head of the Minnesota Business Partnership and Pawlenty's former chief of staff, said the new group expects to be an election-year force that can serve as a counter to unions and other DFL-leaning groups.

"This is going to be, I think, one of the leading [groups] that focuses on economic growth," Weaver said.

MN Forward joins Freedom Club, a group of conservative business people, as Minnesota's first businesses-led organizations seeking to pour corporate dollars into state races.

Over the years, Minnesota business executives and others have written more than \$1 million in personal checks to the club, which contributes to the campaigns of scores of Republican candidates for state office.

The Freedom Club filed paperwork last week that would allow it to raise money from corporations. Details of such financial transactions for the Freedom Club, MN Forward and other similar groups won't surface until reports are filed in mid-July with the state campaign finance board. Spending during the three weeks just before the Aug. 10 primary won't be reported until September.

George Anderson, a business executive overseeing the fundraising effort for the Freedom Club, declined to give details on the new role the club will play.

"We don't try to seek a whole lot of publicity because it's not conducive to anything useful," said Anderson, a vice president at Crown Iron Works in Roseville.

But previous contributions by the Freedom Club and Anderson shed some light on where the new corporate money might flow.

Anderson has given \$292,000 in political contributions since 1998, nearly all of them to GOP party units and candidates, including Gov. Tim Pawlenty and unsuccessful GOP gubernatorial contender Allen Quist.

The Freedom Club also used donations from individuals to contribute \$386,000 since 2005, most of it for state GOP party units and candidates.

The new version of the Freedom Club might try to tap the profits of some of the corporations whose executives wrote personal checks to it in the past. William Austin, CEO of Starkey Laboratories, gave the club \$13,000. Dean Sundquist of Mate Precision Tooling contributed \$53,500. Robert Cummins of Primera Technology gave \$286,000.

For the chamber, fundraising should be easier than when it had to rely on contributions from individuals. The Supreme Court decision also cleared the way for similar spending by unions, but Minnesota has long allowed such spending by organized labor while banning corporate advertising supporting or opposing candidates.

Corporate donations easier

"You have to go to somebody and say, 'Will you give me a thousand dollars?'" recalled Olson. "I've asked somebody for a thousand dollars ... and they've said, 'Dave, I'd rather give you \$10,000 in corporate money.' I think we're going to get some of that."

The Legislature this year added one reporting deadline before the primary election and one before the general election for corporate contributions received and spent. The additional pre-primary report is due July 13 and will cover activity through July 6. Groups also will have to file a report on July 26 covering contributions they received and spent through July 19.