

Democratic committees face money woes



Written by

JANE ROH
Courier-Post Staff

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Campaign finance filings show Democratic Party committees in the tri-county region are in worse financial shape than they were four years ago, the last time all 120 seats in the state Legislature were up for re-election.

Meanwhile, Republican Party committees showed slight or no improvement.

A dramatic fall-off in fundraising was seen in the Gloucester County Democratic Committee, which raised \$65,000 in the second quarter, compared with \$153,000 in the same 2007 period. This time last cycle, Democrats had more than \$320,000 cash; as of July 15, the committee had nearly \$32,000 cash on hand.

While Sen. Fred Madden is the chairman of the GCDC, its face is really Senate President Stephen M. Sweeney, a longtime member of the board of freeholders and among the most powerful state Democratic officials.

John Weingart of the Rutgers-Eagleton Institute of Politics said factors contributing to depressed fundraising for Democrats across the state -- a weak economy, anger among public employee unions and liberals, disinterest in state elections -- probably explained the precipitous drop in receipts.

The county committee may be affected more than others because of Sweeney's backing of a pension and health benefits law that angered public workers, he said.

"There's a pretty dramatic dispirited feeling about politics among most people," Weingart said. "I don't know if all the publicity around redistricting acts as a foregone conclusion for the outcome."

Despite angry protesters who swarmed the State House ahead of the pension and health benefits bill vote, voter turnout this fall is expected to be around 30 percent.

Low turnout tends to have a protective effect on incumbents, no matter how

unknown or unlikable. According to the Election Law Enforcement Commission, incumbents in New Jersey have a more than 90 percent chance of winning re-election. In that sense, sluggish fundraising isn't necessarily terrible news for Democrats.

Not all Republicans are riding the Gov. Chris Christie wave: the Gloucester County Republican Executive Committee raised \$14,200 and ended Q2 with less than \$200 cash on hand. This time in 2007, the committee raised \$8,372 and had \$6,549 in cash.

Redistricting may explain GREC's poor quarter: Assemblyman Domenick DiCicco was lifted out of the 4th District -- where he'd anticipated challenging Madden -- and dropped into the 3rd, Sweeney's home turf. Democratic incumbents John Burzichelli and Celeste Riley will be formidable hurdles to overcome in DiCicco's bid to stay in the Legislature.

That overall trend may sound grim for the GOP minority, but Republicans just might have a few cards left in their deck. It's difficult to imagine what Democrats such as Sweeney could do between now and November to win back public unions and progressives.

Meanwhile, the state Republican committee, NJGOP, is far outpacing its Democratic counterpart. Republicans raised \$1.15 million to the Democrats' \$388,492, most of which is earmarked for federal, not state, elections.

"It's certainly possible that the Republicans will come in with a large amount of money at the end of the campaigns and surprise in some districts," Weingart said. "There is a chance that Republicans will do significantly better in this election than most people seem to think."

Sweeney and fellow conservative Democrats including Donald Norcross in Camden are viewed as unbeatable owing to powerful connections and strong relations with the International Association of Ironworkers and the South Jersey AFL-CIO, respectively.

As a result, the Democratic committees in both counties continue to enjoy support from a host of labor groups such as the Steamfitters and Sheet Metal Workers whose members are typically not public workers.

In Camden County, however, Democrats are on unfamiliar ground: CCDC raised less than \$88,000 and banked \$21,034, compared with \$181,331 raised and

\$134,343 banked in Q2 2007.

But Camden County Republicans need to spend every dollar they have -- leaving little room for error as Election Day approaches. Fundraising also appears to have been handicapped by a leadership shuffle earlier this year.

The CCGOP raised \$8,184 -- compared with \$12,412 raised in Q2 2007.

It will take a lot of pavement-pounding for Camden native Keith Walker to unseat Norcross: the labor leader's campaign account reported nearly \$337,000 cash on hand.

The Burlington County Democratic Committee owes a great deal of thanks to 7th District Assembly candidate Troy Singleton regardless of how he does in November. The NJ Regional Council of Carpenters donated \$5,000, the largest single donation in a respectable \$15,783 haul.

Singleton is vice president of the New Jersey Carpenter-Contractor Trust. The former top aide to former Assembly Speaker Joe Roberts is running with Herb Conaway -- another former boss -- for an open seat.

Filings also show a \$300,000 loan taken out by the Burlington County GOP in 2007 has been paid off in full. Republicans raised \$112,478 last quarter and ended with \$16,254 cash on hand.

Reach Jane Roh at (856) 486-2919 or jroh@gannett.com