

# Find out who is contributing to politicians in New Jersey



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**BY JEFF BRINDLE**

## **COMMENTARY**

With attention riveted upon the gubernatorial and Assembly contests, it was easy this year to overlook elections at the local level.

In fact, elections for county and municipal offices are held every year,

and, unlike statewide races, they don't seem to capture the attention they deserve.

So why should more attention be paid to local contests? The answer is simple: Many important decisions are made by county and municipal officials that directly impact our citizens, both in terms of their pocketbooks and their quality of life.

Moreover, a great deal more money is raised by local candidates to fund campaigns than most people imagine.

An analytical report published by the N.J. Election Law Enforcement Commission in 2005 showed that in 50 randomly selected communities, more than \$162 million was raised and \$144 million spent by candidates between 1994 and 2004.

The most recent data from this year indicates county and municipal candidates raised \$5.5 million in the primary and \$11.5 million in the general election. An analysis of financial activity in the primary found that fund raising topped \$200,000 in five localities, including Bergen County. The other areas were Edison, East Orange, Atlantic City and Middlesex County.

Moreover, fund raising topped \$100,000 in 11 other locations, including Englewood and Passaic County.

A major goal of the commission is to enhance the profile of the agency. If the public is not aware of the commission then citizens cannot utilize its services.

Therefore, ELEC is moving aggressively to ensure transparency of campaign financial activity at every level of government and among every entity involved in the process.

That's why the commission recently unveiled a local candidate-contributor database. This project, which builds upon the legislative and gubernatorial databases, allows for citizens to undertake a search for contributors who have contributed to municipal and county candidates.

All a citizen has to do is key in the name of an individual, business or political entity, and a list of all contributions made by the donor will appear, local as well as statewide. No more must citizens search laboriously through individual reports to see who gave to mayoralty, council, county executive and freeholder candidates.

There is another important benefit to this initiative, and that is in regard to pay-to-play laws. This local database will make it infinitely easier to monitor donations by individuals and businesses that receive public contracts.

In 2008, for instance, county officials awarded more than \$400 million in contracts, while municipalities handed out almost \$800 million in public work. This new database will make it easier to monitor compliance with pay-to-play laws and to uncover violations of these laws.

This new local database initiative is a first step, but it's an important step. The long-term goal is to make contributor information involving municipal party committees, PACs, school board candidates and fire district candidates available in searchable form.

But, for now, it is believed that the commission is moving in the right direction to enable citizens, journalists and academics to be informed to the greatest extent possible about who is giving what and to whom at every level of government.

Certainly, there is a First Amendment right to contribute to political campaigns and adequate funding of campaigns allows candidates to get their message out to the voters, which in turn fosters more competitive elections.

But at the same time, the public has a right to know who is underwriting the campaigns, not only at the state level, but at the local level as well.

This local contributor database goes far toward accomplishing this goal as well as engendering trust in government through

transparency.

*Jeff Brindle is executive director of the N.J. Election Law Enforcement Commission.*