

# Public financing proposal opposed

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**MONTPELIER** — Public advocacy groups and the Vermont Progressive Party say they would rather see public financing of campaigns stay at the statewide level instead of being moved to the local level, as one state official has suggested.

On Thursday, testifying before the Senate Government Operations Committee, the heads of the Vermont Public

Interest Research Group, Common Cause and the Vermont Progressive Caucus took issue with Secretary of State Deborah Markowitz's proposal.

Last week Markowitz, a Democrat, circulated a memo suggesting that legislators begin discussing the possibility of using the state's limited fund for public campaign financing for House and Senate races instead of for

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See Page A7: **Campaigns**



# Campaigns: Financing plan at issue

Continued from Page A1

the governor's and lieutenant governor's races.

She said that because a federal judge had struck down portions of Vermont's 1997 campaign finance law that restricted how much a self-financed candidate could raise and how much political parties could donate, the public money should perhaps be used to finance Senate and House races.

Progressive Anthony Pollina, who got \$300,000 in public funding for his unsuccessful gubernatorial bid, quickly denounced Markowitz's proposal. Pollina was heavily outspent by both Gov. Howard Dean and his Republican challenger, Ruth Dwyer, who each raised nearly \$1 million.

Rep. David Zuckerman, P-Burlington, told the Government Operations Committee that Markowitz's idea "robs Peter to pay Paul, in part based on the ... assumption that (public financing) didn't work."

He disputed that notion, and said the current public financing law should be given more time. Zuckerman also said that the Legislature should consider financing both the statewide and legislative races, pegging the extra cost at about \$300,000 annually.

"If we believe in public funding we should believe in it for all races, not just some of them, and find the money for it,"

Zuckerman said.

Committee chairman Sen. William Doyle, R-Washington, pointed out that polls he'd reviewed didn't show widespread public support for public financing of campaigns.

"Sometimes we've just got to lead," quipped Sen. Susan Bartlett, D-Lamoille.

Paul Burns, director of advocacy for VPIRG, a public advocacy group, and Virginia Renfrew, a lobbyist for Common Cause, both said they supported financing for legislative races, but not at the expense of the statewide race funding.

While Burns praised Markowitz for identifying the problems with the law as it exists now and suggesting solutions, he believed her fixes wouldn't address the issues she highlighted.

Burns suggested that perhaps simply setting the limits higher — which might survive a court challenge — could close the loophole allowing political parties to give unlimited amounts to candidates.

Renfrew said she believed support for public funding was greater than polls indicated.

"I really believe in education," she said. "I think as people learn more about (public financing) they will support it."

Burns said after the hearing that a statewide candidate could get more people involved in the political process — one of the goals of public financing — and

also give a third party candidate a forum for discussing the issue of money in political campaigns.

Markowitz disagreed with the notion that a statewide candidate would give the public financing more bang for the buck, but pointed out that her memo had only been intended to start a conversation, not as a specific policy proposal.

"Reasonable minds can disagree about the underlying public policy ... and whether it's better served by funding local races instead of the statewide races," she said.

Doyle said he planned additional hearings on the matter. While he admits he's not in favor of public financing, he said limiting spending would go a long way toward taking big money out and its effects out of political campaigns.

Vermont Republican Party Executive Director Peter Abbarno said the organization opposed public financing in general, and therefore didn't have a specific position on Markowitz's proposal.

Mark Michaud, executive director Vermont Democratic Party, said, "The party supports public financing of campaigns."

"... Ideally it would be all of them, but if you had to choose, I think the secretary of state made some very valid policy arguments in that memo," he said. "... My sense is her approach is more true to the goals of public financing."