

tampabay.com Know it now.

Money, oil, secrecy

Published Friday, October 23, 2009

Money, oil and secrecy make a dangerous brew. The latest evidence came with the disclosure that Florida's new U.S. senator — who has pledged to slow debate on offshore oil drilling in federal waters — had a decidedly different stance when it came to drilling in closer state waters. Until he took office last month, U.S. Sen. George LeMieux was a hired consultant for Florida Energy Associates. The consortium is seeking to lift the state's 20-year ban on offshore drilling but has repeatedly refused to name the out-of-state oil interests that make up its membership.

According to Senate financial disclosure forms, the group paid LeMieux at least \$5,000 and possibly more, since an exact figure is not required. What was LeMieux's role in the effort to get an offshore drilling bill passed by the Florida Legislature? Both he and Florida Energy Associates refuse to say. LeMieux says it would violate attorney-client privilege, and Doug Daniels, a Daytona Beach lawyer working for the group, says he doesn't remember. Conveniently.

If the consortium wanted to be a more trusted force on public policy it would waive any privilege and encourage LeMieux to disclose his advice and how much he was paid. The information is relevant to LeMieux's future actions on a federal proposal to open up offshore drilling.

But so far, this is a group that hasn't cared about transparency, even as it seeks access to a treasured asset owned by all Floridians. Rather, it's counting on spreading cash around Tallahassee to align allies, hiring well-connected lobbyists and public relations experts and donating at least \$125,000 to the state's Republican and Democratic parties.

The group's pitch is that drilling could help solve Florida's fiscal problems by raising as much as \$2.25 billion a year, a figure that doesn't come close to jibing with the experience of other gulf states. As the state's top environmental official told a Florida House committee on Wednesday, Alabama makes only between \$50 million and \$300 million from oil royalties and severance taxes. In Texas, it's about \$45 million a year.

Florida Energy Associates has been clear that its out-of-state members want to do their arm-twisting in private. Now their secrecy includes a sitting U.S. senator, one of Gov. Charlie Crist's inner circle. Maybe that is why the group has been greeted with so much skepticism and distrust. It's deserved.

© 2009 • All Rights Reserved • St. Petersburg Times
490 First Avenue South • St. Petersburg, FL 33701 • 727-893-8111
[Contact Us](#) | [Join Us](#) | [Advertise with Us](#) | [Subscribe to the St. Petersburg Times](#)
[Privacy Policy](#) | [Standard of Accuracy](#) | [Terms, Conditions & Copyright](#)