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Parties rake in oil, gas cash

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With the debate over offshore oil drilling gaining steam but the outcome still in doubt, oil and gas companies have stepped up their contributions to the state's major political parties.

Florida Energy Associates, a mostly anonymous group of oil and gas companies that want to drill off Florida's Gulf coast, has contributed \$125,000 this year. The biggest chunk - \$75,000 - went to the state Republican Party. The Democratic Party received the remaining \$50,000.

"They're using what's called the 'soft money' loophole," said Ben Wilcox, board chairman of Common Cause Florida, an elections watchdog group. "Basically, they can contribute unlimited amounts to the political parties. The parties can use that money to make direct contributions to candidates or to pay for in-kind campaign expenses. ... It's a way, instead of being limited to \$500 contributions per candidate, to funnel huge amounts of money into the political process."

Florida Energy Associates contributed \$70,000 of its total contributions during the fundraising quarter that ended Sept. 30. The group has made all its contributions since the spring legislative session, when it pressed lawmakers to lift the longstanding ban on drilling in state waters.

That plan, from House Speaker-designate Dean Cannon, would have authorized the Cabinet to approve leases for drilling as close as 3 miles from the coast. The late-arrived proposal stalled in the Senate, but Cannon plans to revise and reintroduce it in time for the 2010 session. As chairman of a House policy committee, he has scheduled a four-and-a-half hour workshop on the issue on Wed., Oct. 21.

Mike Haridopolos says he will sponsor the proposal in the Senate.

Haridopolos, R-Indianapolis, is expected to become Senate president in 2011, when Cannon, R-Winter Park, takes over the House.

Doug Daniels, chief operating officer for Florida Energy Associates, said spending on the major parties is preferable to concentrating on individual campaigns because the candidates "would have the difficulty of trying to explain why they're taking a contribution from an organization like that. ... A contribution to the process is not singling somebody out."

Daniels refuses to identify most of the companies in his group, which has hired a high-octane team of nearly 30 lobbyists to make its case for drilling.

Among those lobbyists is Claudia Diaz de la Portilla, wife of state Senate Majority Leader Alex Diaz de la Portilla, R-Miami, who recently became head of the Senate's panel on energy, the environment and land use.

Florida Energy Associates' members are not "big" companies, and their contributions reflect that,

Daniels said. "We're not the kind that's going to come in and buy up elections and politicians. Sometimes I wonder why we make contributions to the parties at all, other than tradition," he said. "That's not going to buy any votes, the level at which we'll be making contributions - even if it was for sale."

Wilcox agreed that so far the oil group is a midsize contributor, but it is likely to keep pumping out money, he said.

He also predicted that contributions will spike just before the legislative session.

"I would say it's very effective. If it wasn't, these people wouldn't be making campaign contributions of \$120,000-plus," Wilcox said. "They're hoping, definitely, to get a favorable outcome out of it. They wouldn't do it if they didn't think it made a difference."

Daniels said his group's contributions may continue and could extend to individual candidates. "You've got to take care of your friends, of course, the people who have been supportive of you."

Average Floridians may never know how much any political donor is spending. That's because a federal court recently threw out Florida's reporting requirements for political fundraising groups known as Electioneering Communications Organizations.

By law, ECOs cannot expressly advocate for or against a candidate or issue. But the law defines that so narrowly that it is relatively easy for ECOs to run thinly veiled promotions or attack ads.

Such organizations give wealthy donors the opportunity to curry favor with politicians, pressure them for action and influence the outcome of their elections, all without the public knowing.

Rep. Leonard Bembry, D-Greenville, said he would hope his colleagues' votes are never for sale, at any price.

A freshman lawmaker who opposes lifting the drilling ban, Bembry said he's not surprised Florida Energy Associates is donating to the parties. The group is pressing its case hard, he said.

"I just hope that people will look at it and understand it for what it is, that they will care more about our environment than the possibility of saving a few dollars on cheaper energy."