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Developer cash flows into Eagle Mountain races

Are the industry's contributions tied to city's political woes?

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EAGLE MOUNTAIN — There are two political truths in Eagle Mountain: No. 1: Money is the key to winning an election. No. 2: Developers are the key to getting money.

That's why every elected official from the city's past two elections — excluding the current, council-appointed mayor — accepted substantial amounts of campaign money from developers, construction companies and real estate groups. They wanted to win — and did.

But the ongoing tradition of getting big campaign bucks from the development industry may soon change as some residents are beginning to blame the city's history of political problems on a too-close connection with the industry. Some candidates are even refusing campaign contributions from developers as a part of their election platform.

Utah law doesn't limit from whom candidates can receive campaign money, but political analysts say candidates should be wary of accepting funds that may have invisible strings attached to them. Accepting a majority of funds from one source can also have an unwitting impact on elected officials, says Kirk Jowers, director of the Hinckley Institute of Politics.

In 2005, 57 percent of the winning officials' campaign funds came from the development industry. Two years earlier, city leaders received 56 percent of their campaign funds from the special interest group. In both elections, 31 percent and 45 percent, respectively, of the overall amount of the developers' winning contributions came from one developer, John Walden.

"It certainly makes an impact on the elected officials, regardless of whether there's any bad intent," Jowers said. "The vast majority of campaign contributions have nothing to do with untoward motives. The problem comes when there are so few contributors and a contribution can have such a huge impact on a candidate's election. There probably is nothing stated, nothing promised, but simple human nature will certainly make you more sympathetic to someone who has provided one-third to one-half of your war chest."

All of the city's current council accepted donations from developers at some point during their campaigns because the city has a limited commercial base. In 2005, about 52 percent of Councilwoman Heather Jackson's campaign money came from construction companies and entities interested in development. Jackson is running for mayor.

"It's an issue that has come around the block every time there is an election in Eagle Mountain," Jackson said. "There are people in the city that think that if you take developer money that you're going to be owned by the developers.... When you do get money from developers, that doesn't mean that you're beholden to those developers. You should listen to them when they call you, but you shouldn't listen to them any differently than you would listen to your neighbor if they called you."

Four of the city's five City Council members say they never felt any pressure from developers as a result of their campaign, but Councilwoman Linn Strouse, who is running for re-election, disagrees. Strouse has vowed not to accept developer money in her campaign and even sent back an unsolicited \$100 developer check via registered mail.

"I don't think receiving developer money necessarily makes you unethical, but the pressure I found that

certain developers put on you is just not worth it," Strouse said. "I don't want to go there again."

Strouse is facing a second-degree felony charge of not disclosing a monetary gift she received from Walden while in office.

Sen. Mark Madsen, R-Lehi, who is Walden's legal representative for Eagle Mountain Properties, says it makes sense that developers contribute to campaigns because the companies have so much to lose based on city decisions.

"As developers, we put a lot of money into city coffers," Madsen said. "Campaign contributions are a pittance compared to the fees we pay on every single house that is constructed, not to mention the infrastructure we build and hand over to the city as a finished product. When you're putting that kind of money and those kinds of resources into city coffers, you want to make sure that people are in office that will do the right thing with that money, and that's not always the case."

Madsen said Eagle Mountain Properties gave a monetary donation to every candidate in this election to support the political process, but he is wary of who will be elected. Political fiascoes don't benefit developers when they're trying to attract more businesses, Madsen said. Former Mayor Brian Olsen was supported by Walden in his 2005 election before he resigned from office and was charged with three felony counts of misuse of public funds.

"We've had a limited talent pool in the past," Madsen said. "Hopefully we have some good candidates this time around that will be conscientious stewards of the people's money."

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