

The Salt Lake Tribune

Question of ethics: Developers defend campaign contributions, but some candidates spurn their cash

By Steve Gehrke
The Salt Lake Tribune

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A political bid, even for the most basic city office, comes with a hefty price tag for all those signs, T-shirts, parties and mailers.

In Draper alone, a suburb of 36,000, the final six City Council candidates coughed up an average of \$13,000 each. And in the fledgling northwest Utah County city of Eagle Mountain, the final six paid an average of \$4,500 each, while the two mayoral candidates averaged closer to \$14,000.

But big bills mean big contributions. And candidates in the state's rapidly growing suburbs typically rely on cash from developers looking to profit from plopping down homes and businesses on top of still-bare land.

In booming Draper, developers gave nearly \$15,000, or 28 percent of all

contributions. While that left the majority of funds flowing from other sources, no single entity or industry even approached the developers' generosity.

In Eagle Mountain, one of the fastest-growing communities along the Wasatch Front, the building community isn't letting up. It pitched in upward of \$20,000, or more than 30 percent of city-candidates' campaign contributions. Just as in Draper, developers were the single largest giving entity in this west-of-Lehi community.

For example, Councilwoman Heather Jackson pulled in 76 percent of her campaign finances - more than \$12,000 of her total \$15,800 - from the building industry en route to her easy victory in the race for mayor.

She said the developers' faith in her campaign is a sign that she can work with them. Jackson, who plans to step down as an escrow officer when she takes the city's reins in January, added that she accepted money from a wide range of developers, not just one.

Her City Council campaign two years ago likewise was highly developer-funded, but Jackson said she has never been pressured to vote in a particular way on an issue.

"With a city, you have to represent your residents, but part of the process -

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especially in a new and growing city - is we need to expand things like the commercial base and bring businesses in.

"If you can't work with the businesses, then why run?"

But another group opposes the concept of accepting developer cash.

Four candidates running under a ticket called "The Eagle Mountain Promise" refused developer money as part of their call to look at long-term planning and allow the infrastructure to catch up with home building.

Council candidate Kenneth Hixson says he wanted to avoid perceptions that developers dominated his interests and maintain his ability to represent all of Eagle Mountain.

The group self-generated well over \$10,000 in nondeveloper cash, but all its candidates were trounced. Two of its members were rocked by ironic, separate scandals - one involving a real-estate issue, the other involving a developer's "loan."

Then there's Bluffdale. It's one of the few Salt Lake County communities still with a lot of wide-open land developers generally covet. But the community, which strictly sticks to its one-home-per-acre philosophy and eschews jammed subdivisions, is not developer-friendly.

In its City Council races this fall, developers tended to hold onto their cash. Only Councilman-elect Rod Flanigan pocketed money from developers; he accepted \$1,200.

Not so in neighboring Draper, which has steep-hillside developments proliferating along its eastern edge. There, incumbent Bill Colbert found himself the sole candidate without any developer support - and for good reason.

He sharply criticized the hilltop development SunCrest, where he lives, and championed a geologic-hazards ordinance that makes it harder for developers to build in certain areas of the city. He won re-election nonetheless.

Political expert Kirk Jowers points out that contributions are just part of the democratic process, and developers' involvement in government can be a good thing.

"They certainly have plenty to gain and lose, so they are self-interested in participating in our electoral process," said the director of the University of Utah's Hinckley Institute of Politics.

"Provided they follow the laws and don't ask for any improper favors, it's hard to complain about their activities."

But some onlookers complain anyway, fearing their officials will lose sight of the public interest. Some say the laws in place

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are too loose, and they perceive the wealth of developer money fattening politicians' pocketbooks is a sign that politicians have been bought off.

Salt Lake County resident Pearl Meibos has firsthand experience with what can happen when officials' ears are monopolized by developers.

She ran for a seat on the Salt Lake County Commission back in 1994, and endured a 15-year legal battle over development that boxed in her Fort Union-area home. Meibos said the line between campaign contributions and bribery is blurred, and she wants more transparency in the financial processes.

"The only people who contribute to government are those who have something to gain - like developers and special-interest groups," Meibos said. "Developers want certain people in because they want to know they're going to get something in return. In a sense, that is bribery. But it's also a fact of life in running for office.

"Development is where the money is to be had on a local level . . . and it's all about making 'wink-wink, nudge-nudge' promises. The laws are so loose that you can say, 'I received \$30,000, that's probably a conflict and I'm voting anyway.' "

Jowers said it's understandable for

the public to be concerned with the appearance of conflict when the building community shels out thousands and plugs it into candidates' coffers, especially in cases where there's no balance to those gifts.

"When the campaign finance laws are so loose, and where other interests do not get involved, it can completely subvert the governmental process," he said. "If the only voice being heard is the developer, it's doubtful the public good will have been done."

But Jowers maintains that democracy, even at the local level, depends on donations - otherwise only the wealthy could run. So the people should check the influence of special-interest groups, and the government should create laws that don't allow for as much mischief.

"The government can make or break almost any company or industry with a single decision," Jowers said. "So developers are doing what is required of them in democracy - participating by contributing and volunteering because their interests are at stake."

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