

6 pro-gambling PACs spent \$4.6 million to push casino expansion - City & Region

Written by Administrator
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ALBANY – It began Sept. 18 with a \$2,555 check written to a Minnesota lawn sign company, peaked Oct. 23 when \$1.5 million was spent in just a single 24-hour period and wrapped up with a final check going out the door Nov. 26.

When it was all over in a remarkably brief period of time, six pro-gambling political action committees spent \$4.6 million to persuade voters to approve the largest expansion of casino gambling in state history Nov. 5, campaign disclosure reports filed this week with the state Elections Board show.

That is 40 times the \$115,000 spent by one anti-gambling group, which popped up in the last week of the campaign that saw 57 percent of voters statewide authorize up to seven new casinos in New York.

The pro-casino money does not include an unknown amount – they do not have to disclose it – spent by at least a half-dozen major labor unions persuading members to vote for casino expansion. The AFL-CIO this week did disclose it spent \$77,000 trying to get nonmembers to the polls to vote for the casino measure – taking the overall level of pro-casino forces to at least \$4.7 million.

“We simply have to say we were overwhelmed,” said Stephen Shafer, chairman of the Coalition Against Gambling in New York, a group founded a decade ago in Buffalo. His group had so little to spend – “just shy” of \$1,000 – that it did not even meet the public disclosure threshold levels in the state’s election law.

The vast majority of the money was unleashed by New York Jobs Now, aligned with Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo, the architect of the gambling program. The group, officially housed out of the Business Council of New York State’s Albany headquarters, spent \$4.2 million in just over a month, mostly on television ads that ran heavily on downstate channels where the referendum passed with ease. If the full time it took for New York Jobs Now to pay all of its bills is counted, a period that ran until the end of November, the group spent at a blitzkrieg-like frenzy of \$81,000 a day.

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Proposition One, so named because of its placement on the statewide ballot, was rejected by a majority of voters in all Western New York counties, as well as a sprinkling of counties from Rochester to Albany.

Billed as a coalition of “business leaders, labor unions, economic development professionals, educators and citizens committed to creating jobs, increasing aid to schools and permitting local governments to lower property taxes,” New York Jobs Now was funded almost exclusively by either unions whose members stand to benefit by the casino expansion or gambling companies that hope to see profits soar if they are a part of one of the seven future casino ventures now permitted by the change to the State Constitution.

Big money – hitting as much as \$750,000 apiece in some cases – came from gambling interests as far-flung as Malaysia and Las Vegas to unions representing teachers, firefighters, teamsters and hotel workers.

In all, there were six entities registered with the Elections Board promoting Proposition One. Among them was the Nevele hotel project in the Catskills, which spent \$268,000 on its own beyond the \$100,000 it donated to New York Jobs Now. Racetracks with existing scaled-down casinos in Binghamton and Utica, whose majority owner is a New York City real estate developer, spent \$68,000 on top of the money they also gave the Jobs Now group. A last-minute group, Saratoga for Proposal One, spent just \$1,600.

Meanwhile, the Committee Against Proposition One, based in the Catskills and which was not formed until one week before the election, spent \$115,000, with just \$16,000 of that on a one-channel television purchase. The group, though, did not report how it raised its money. Much of its spending went to small “wages” of several-hundred dollars apiece during election week – money that most likely went to election-day poll watchers and get-out-the-vote workers.

Citizens for New York Gaming, based in Sullivan County, which could end up getting two of the first four initial casinos set to be awarded in 2014, spent \$55,000 on signs, billboards and a \$20,000 radio campaign on Long Island in the week leading up to Nov. 5. Its two biggest donations – totaling \$45,000 – came from a gambling company and Indian-owned Connecticut casino that are both eyeing a Catskills casino resort.

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“This was an opportunity for us to maybe have a rebirth to the hospitality industry that’s been missing here for 25 years,” said Randy Resnick, a restaurant and hotel owner in the southern Catskills, who is president of the pro-casino group. Resnick said he and others formed the group a couple of months before the election and had been trying to persuade others, notably the Jobs Now group, to coordinate efforts.

It was Jobs Now, with political advice from Cuomo advisers, that ran a heavy ad campaign that focused on money being made available for public schools and other popular programs and less so on the actual casino growth. The group coordinated the efforts of some of the most potent political union forces in the state and got would-be casino developers to donate huge individual sums of money.

In the end, 98 percent of all money spent was done so by pro-casino forces – not including the unknown amount of money unions unleashed on phone banks, literature and get-out-the-vote efforts with their members to support the referendum proposal.

It was a campaign barrage that casino opponents said they could never have matched.

“The lesson is that we could not get out what we consider the truth about the costs of gambling expansion against the media blitz that was made possible by that kind of money,” Shafer said Wednesday, when told how much the pro-casino ended up spending. “Voters went to the polls, in our opinion, not all that well-informed on what they were voting for,” he added.

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