

11/05/2004

Clean Government fingers fellow reformers

Jim Baron

PROVIDENCE -- It isn't just politicians that Operation Clean Government keeps an eye on.

The government watchdog group this week called out a coalition of fellow reformers for failing to file the proper campaign finance and was expected to vote Thursday night to do research preparing to file a "unified complaint" against any and all groups that supported or opposed ballot questions and did not comply with campaign finance law.

Chairman Robert Arruda acknowledged that OCG supported Question 2, but he said that is not the reason he is pursuing the campaign finance filings. He said the group did not feel it was proper to bring a complaint just before an election, but always intended to pursue the matter after the vote.

He noted that other groups, such as Working Rhode Island, the coalition of unions that was active in some General Assembly races this year and is a part of Citizens for Representative Government, have also not filed as a corporation or PAC.

After a news story appeared in Thursday's Times pointing out that Citizens for Representative Government, the coalition formed to oppose Question 2 on last Tuesday's ballot -- a referendum to call a constitutional convention -- had not filed any reports with the state Board of Elections, the group filed a Notice of Organization and a Schedule of Independent Expenditures with the elections board. It provided no information on where any of the \$22,804.40 that it spent came from.

At the top of the Notice of Organization form there are four categories by which a group is supposed to define itself: a candidate or officeholder; a political party committee; a political action committee (PAC) or a corporation supporting or opposing a ballot question. Each category has a box to check that corresponds with the group filing.

Citizens for Representative Government, in a form filed by Edward O'Brien, drew a fifth box with an "x" in it and the handwritten description "non-PAC coalition."

"They've got themselves a big problem," Arruda told The Times. "The law is absolutely clear. Advocates for or opposed to a ballot question must form a corporation or PAC. They don't have the ability to oppose a ballot question.

"This is pretty serious," Arruda asserted. "It is undermining the very process of elections and ballot questions."

O'Brien could not be reached for comment. Guy Dufault of Working Rhode Island, who provided The Times with copies of the reports the group filed Thursday, could not be reached for comment.

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Exhibit X

Steven Brown, executive director of the ACLU of RI, one of the groups that formed the coalition, said Citizens for Representative Government, which was dormant for some time, formed just a couple of weeks before the election and spent all of its money just days before the election, so it had not been required to file campaign finance reports previous to that.

In the papers filed with the board, the group did virtually all of its spending on Oct. 28. It included \$1,750 to Global Marketing for "phone calls"; \$9,986 to Cox Communications for cable TV ads and \$4,876 to Citidel Communications and \$4,997 to Clear Channel Corp. for radio ads. The only other expenditure listed was on Nov. 1, the day before the election, 1,175 to Signs by Tomorrow, for signs.

H. Philip West Jr., executive director of Common Cause, another of the groups in the coalition, said he had recognized the need to file reports and urged that the group do so, but added that Common Cause "has no hand in the fiscal management of the coalition.