



## **Elections Board to examine spending on ballot questions**

**The present statute is "ambiguous and impractical, resulting in an unenforceable law," board chairman Roger N. Begin says.**

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PROVIDENCE -- The state Board of Elections said yesterday that it would try to unravel a tangle of questions about regulating the money spent to promote or defeat ballot questions, such as the multimillion-dollar bond issues voters regularly consider.

Roger N. Begin, the board's chairman, said the expectation that a casino question would appear on last fall's ballot helped bring the the issue to attention, even though the question did not make it to the ballot.

Begin said the present statute was "ambiguous and impractical, resulting in an unenforceable law."

He said the board would create a Task Force on Campaign Finance to propose legislation for this session of the General Assembly.

Begin said he wanted a solution that was both practical and "transparent" -- one that allowed the public to know where the money comes from.

That would mean making it possible to identify the individuals who control money that could be channeled through multiple companies before it is spent on advertising or other campaign expenses.

He said the task force would include legislators, members of the Board of Elections, Common Cause, the Chamber of Commerce, and probably an academic expert.

The existing law, Begin said, bars two or more entities from acting in concert on a ballot question campaign. He used the example of the Chamber of Commerce, a group whose members are businesses.

"We have actually taken both sides on that question," Begin said. The board, he said, had said at one point that the chamber was actually several entities and so couldn't legally spend money on ballot question campaigns, and at another that it was only a single entity, and so could spend money to influence a referendum outcome.

Meanwhile, state law bans corporate contributions to the campaigns of individual candidates, which conflicts with either approach to referendum questions.

"Furthermore," Begin said, "we have been operating under a federal court decision that adds further uncertainty to the constitutionality of existing legal restrictions."

That decision held that the state couldn't limit what an individual or a single corporation can spend, he said.

"This task force will attempt to address the myriad legal and practical issues relating to ballot advocacy and present its recommendations to the legislature," he said.

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