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EDITORIAL

Influence of PACs in local politics is disconcerting

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With the elections less than one week away, it's disconcerting to see advertisements in support of local candidates recently that were paid for by an out-of-state entity.

Ocean Properties Ltd. is behind these ads, and their name might sound familiar from the not-so-long-ago effort to gain approval for a racino in Biddeford. The company, based in New Hampshire, is the donor behind the appropriately named Race for ME political action committee. They're now throwing money behind the candidates who supported them in their efforts to bring a racino to Biddeford last year.

As the 2010 Citizens United decision affirmed, American politics is a "pay-to-play" system. Candidate's own campaigns have to adhere to strict limits on fundraising, a rule that was created to keep well-endowed entities from buying influence in the political system. But now any PAC can contribute unlimited sums of money toward any candidate's campaign, with or without their knowledge or approval, in an effort to promote their own interests. The money can come not only from individuals but from corporations and unions, too.

The power of PACs is taking hold nationwide, and it's here in Maine, too, with PACs playing a role from both inside and outside of the state. A "Money in Politics" study released Thursday by the Maine Citizens for Clean Elections shows that during the period from 2002-12, more than \$12 million flowed through PACs controlled by candidates and legislators. More than \$5 million of that came from "a handful of major players with commercial, vested interests, each of whom gave over \$60,000," the report states.

It's a matter of free speech to allow any citizen – or indeed corporation, as the Supreme Court has ruled – to donate to a political cause. The problem comes with the fact that there is no limit in place. When there is no ceiling for contributions, only the most affluent donors will have an audible voice in our political process.

Clean Elections candidates, who collect \$5 donations from constituents and can contribute a limited amount of seed money in order to earn funding from the state, simply can't compete with this kind of fundraising. And neither can privately financed candidates, whose campaign contribution limit is \$350 per donor.

The Legislature clearly isn't interested in changing the policy, as proposals to limit the amount that can be donated to PACs have been put forth in the past three legislatures, but have not passed.

A bill to allow candidates to gather more donations and qualify for more Clean Elections funds to counter ads against them is stalled in the Legislature, so Clean Elections candidates currently have no ability to respond to the efforts of PACs near the end of the race unless they've saved up all their money for the end.

It's expensive to run for office, between all the travel, the brochures, signs and advertisements in which candidates have to invest, so one might think that they'd be glad to take the help from PACs, but that's not always the case. Candidates have to be very careful about their public appearance and their support – even if it's unsolicited – to avoid even the appearance of impropriety. Joanne Twomey, Biddeford's former mayor and legislator who is running for House seat 135, said she wasn't aware of the Race for ME PAC until after the ads ran – and added that she's "not for sale."

Twomey wholeheartedly supported the racino effort back in 2011, so it makes sense that Ocean Properties would want to see her in a position of power once again. Same goes for Rep. Don Pilon and Sen. Nancy Sullivan, who the PAC is also supporting, both of whom supported allowing Biddeford Downs to be built without a statewide referendum.

The pressure Ocean Properties could put on them to support its causes should certainly be of concern to voters. Sure, these candidates might vote in favor of racino issues anyway, when they come up again, of their own free will. But it's hard not to get an uneasy vibe from all that money: We got you into power, so now you owe us your vote.

With all the leeway PACs have been given to influence politics with money, it's a difficult time to be a voter. How are we all supposed to keep track of the various interests of those who are funding candidates, let alone who those candidates are and what we can expect of them if they make it into office? It's no wonder more and more people are losing faith in the political process, and fewer are exercising their right to vote. The ultimate question is this: Can we trust our legislators not to be influenced by the big money interests that helped get them into the Statehouse?

This uncomfortable allowance of outside money in Maine politics is a major reason why we should continue to support the Clean Elections system and push for campaign finance reform that will keep the influence of big money out of the legislative decision-making processes that affect us all.

Today's editorial was written by City Editor Robyn Burnham on behalf of the Journal Tribune Editorial Board. Questions? Comments? Contact Managing Editor Kristen Schulze Muszynski by calling 282-1535, Ext. 322, or via email at kristenm@journaltribune.com.