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Senators Advocate Transparency in Campaigns

JEFFERSON CITY, MO – Democratic Senators tried to bring more openness to lobbying activities and campaign contributions with amendments to an elections bill heard on the Senate floor today.

The amendments -- offered by Sens. Maida Coleman (St. Louis), Chuck Graham (Columbia) and Tim Green (St. Louis) -- would have made tracking contributions and lobbying efforts easier for the public.

“There is a feeling among voters that their voices can’t compete with influential special interests,” Democratic Floor Leader Sen. Coleman said. “It is important for Missouri citizens to believe that we are doing the right thing.”

Sen. Coleman offered an amendment that would ban parents, siblings and children of statewide elected officials from lobbying state lawmakers. “It seems inappropriate to allow lobbyists to be closely tied to our highest elected officials,” Sen. Coleman said.

The amendment was defeated along party lines.

Assistant Democratic Floor Leader Sen. Chuck Graham offered an amendment that would require any person who is appointed by the governor’s administration to run a fee office to file campaign contribution reports with the state ethics commission.

“It is my understanding that the governor can raise as much as \$1 million from the very people he appoints to run these offices,” Sen. Graham said. “The public deserves to know who is getting these appointments and how much campaign money each appointee gives to the governor and other candidates.”

Sen. Graham’s amendment was also defeated along party lines.

Sen. Tim Green offered an amendment that would remove limits placed on campaign contributions to candidates and placed them instead on independent committees, also called third-party committees.

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Sen. Green said he offered the amendment, because special interests can contribute unlimited donations to third-party committees, which can then spend the money on behalf of candidates. In 2004 alone, third-party committees spent and contributed more than \$63 million.

“When we placed limits on contributions to candidates, we thought we were going to curtail the amount of money flowing into political campaigns, but we just poured gasoline onto a burning fire instead,” Sen. Green said.

By eliminating the caps placed on candidate campaign committees and placing them on third-party committees, Sen. Green said the public would be able to find out exactly who spends what on whom.

Sen. Green said that currently, it is very difficult to find out what third-party committees spend on individual candidates. If those committees were placed under limits, the money would flow directly to the individual candidate committees, which the public could easily view the contributions.

“Campaign contribution limits did not stop the flow of money to campaigns but it did make it much harder to track the money,” Sen. Green said.

A substitute for Sen. Green’s amendment was offered and adopted by the Senate, which orders the Missouri Ethics Commission to study the effectiveness of the current campaign contribution limits by holding hearings about how the current system can be improved.

Sen. Green supported the substitute amendment because, he said, it would at least start the process of making the current system more transparent.
