

EDITORIAL

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Finance fumes

Campaign reformers go for smoke, not substance

From the start, sloppiness and inconsistency have marked the effort by local social activists to bring sweeping change to campaign financing in Akron. In May 1998, a key report by the Northeast Ohio American Friends Service Committee linked campaign contributions to city contracts. Its authors knew, but did not reveal, that all but a tiny fraction went to the low bidders.

Last week, the group was at it again, leveling wild charges that a charter amendment approved by voters later in 1998 is not being enforced. The analysis of giving in 2003 was released for maximum political impact, candidates gearing up for this fall's elections.

The most serious charge leveled is that six of nine candidates for ward seats in 2003 violated \$100 contribution limits. The interpretation flies in the face of federal court rulings and what is in an ordinance (passed without protest) detailing how to implement the charter change. The 1998 ballot issue specifically called for the council to pass such legislation.

After the federal courts struck down charter language defining the campaign season as overly restrictive, drafters of the enabling legislation followed the pattern set by state and federal election law: Contribution limits apply per election, primary, general and special. In a standard election cycle, then, ward candidates are allowed to accept a total of \$200 from a single source.

The American Friends Service Committee argues that since the charter amendment refers to "campaign contribution," the meaning should be clear, one contribution, \$100. The group also considers contributions made before the enabling legislation went into effect in 2003 fair game. Further, its members carp about candidates not completely identifying contributors by home address and employer.

The campaign spending report and its conclusions are deeply flawed, especially as Akron's limits are among the lowest in the country and its political spending very modest. Clamping down so hard makes it difficult for challengers to mount campaigns and could drive money into channels outside the reach of municipal law. That's hardly what voters had in mind in 1998. The complaint about incomplete forms ignores amended reports.

Rather than complain, the activists could try to alter the enabling legislation, a route they have abandoned in favor of a quick headline.