

HOUSE BILL REPORT

SHB 1226

As Reported by House Committee On:
State Government Operations & Accountability

Title: An act relating to campaign contribution limits.

Brief Description: Adjusting application of campaign contribution limits.

Sponsors: House Committee on State Government Operations & Accountability (originally sponsored by Representatives Schual-Berke, Tom, Haigh, Cody, Fromhold, Jarrett, Hudgins, Conway, Appleton, Flannigan, Murray, McCoy, Lantz, Hasegawa, Williams, Kagi, Ormsby, Morrell, Chase, Dickerson, Kenney and Sells).

Brief History:

Committee Activity:

State Government Operations & Accountability: 1/10/06, 1/18/06 [DP2S].

Brief Summary of Second Substitute Bill

- Extends campaign contribution limits to candidates for county offices in a county that has over 200,000 registered voters and to candidates for the Washington Supreme Court and Court of Appeals.

HOUSE COMMITTEE ON STATE GOVERNMENT OPERATIONS & ACCOUNTABILITY

Majority Report: The second substitute bill be substituted therefor and the second substitute bill do pass. Signed by Representatives Haigh, Chair; Green, Vice Chair; Hunt, McDermott and Miloscia.

Minority Report: Do not pass. Signed by Representatives Nixon, Ranking Minority Member; Clements, Assistant Ranking Minority Member; Schindler and Sump.

Staff: Marsha Reilly (786-7135).

Background:

The Fair Campaign Practices Act was enacted following passage of Initiative 134 in 1992. The initiative imposed campaign contribution limits, further regulated independent expenditures, restricted the use of public funds for political purposes, and required public officials to report gifts received in excess of \$50. The contribution limits imposed by Initiative 134 apply only to elections for statewide office and state legislative office.

Contribution limits imposed on an individual, a union or business, or a political action committee are an aggregate of \$700 per election to a candidate for state legislative office, and an aggregate of \$1,400 per election to a candidate for statewide office.

Limits also apply to political parties. State party central committees, minor party committees, and legislative caucus committees may contribute an aggregate of up to \$0.70 per registered voter in the candidate's district for an election cycle. County central committees and legislative district committees may contribute an aggregate of up to \$0.35 per registered voter in the candidate's district. Contributions received from county central committees and legislative district committees combined may not exceed an amount more than \$0.35 times the number of registered voters statewide to any one candidate.

These limits are adjusted for inflation by the Public Disclosure Commission every two years.

Summary of Second Substitute Bill:

Campaign contribution limits are extended to apply to:

- (1) candidates for county office in a county that has over 200,000 registered voters; and
- (2) candidates for the Washington Supreme Court and Court of Appeals.

Contribution limits imposed for candidates for county offices and Court of Appeals judges may not exceed an aggregate of \$700 per election and for candidates for the Washington Supreme Court an aggregate of \$1,400 per election from an individual, a union or business, or a political action committee. Political party contribution limits also apply.

Changes were made to update the monetary limits for inflation, as provided for in RCW 42.17.690.

Contributions to candidates for whom the new limits apply that are received before the effective date of the Act are considered to be contributions for the purposes of campaign contribution limits statutes. Contributions that exceed the limitations and have not been spent by the recipient by the effective date of this Act must be disposed of in accordance with RCW 42.17.095, disposal of surplus funds, except that it may not be held by the candidate for a future election or be used for non-reimbursed public office-related expenses.

Second Substitute Bill Compared to Substitute Bill:

In the second substitute, contribution limits for candidates for special purpose district offices were removed. Technical changes were made to update the monetary limits.

Appropriation: None.

Fiscal Note: Available.

Effective Date of Second Substitute Bill: The bill contains an emergency clause and takes effect immediately.

Testimony For: (In support) The bill has received a lot of support. Many newspapers have supported the bill. We have more reason than ever before to expand the will of the people. We have seen money in extraordinary measure flow into the offices covered under this bill in recent years. With events at the federal level we are increasingly aware of the influence of special interests to undermine the public trust. The Superior Court does not seem to have the same scope or impact, in terms of setting legal precedent, as the Supreme and Courts of Appeals have. The King County Bar Association supports Section 2 of the bill. Many states have enacted limits. In fact, only four states have no limits on judicial races. The concept of contribution limits was endorsed by the Walsh Commission. A telling presentation based upon research done by a public interest group was presented at a recent conference. It showed that at least 75 percent of the public believe that contributions to judges make a significant difference in judicial opinions, as well as do 26 percent of judges. In the races for the Supreme and Superior courts, the winner has always raised much more money than the loser. Money talks in judicial elections. For every 10 percent spent, a yield of 3 percent of the votes is realized. This is a crisis in the appearance of fairness. Washington State Trial Lawyers and the Washington State Trial Defense Lawyers also support the bill. The King County Municipal League supports Section 2 of the bill. When limits were originally passed, it was thought that it was not necessary. That is no longer true. The increase in expenditures raises quality, fairness, and the appearance of fairness issues. The person who raises the most money will not necessarily be the best judge, but the better fund raiser. If 26 percent of judges say that campaign contributions have an influence on their decisions, that is a problem. Even if a judge is capable of ignoring the potential implications of their next election, voters need to have confidence that fair decisions are being made in an even fashion.

(In support with amendment) The Washington State Bar Association endorses and supports Section 2 of the bill. In the Supreme Court race last year, more than \$700,000 was spent in one race. The cornerstone of our democracy is an independent judiciary. We are in the era of \$1 million Supreme Court races. The appearance of independence will be adversely affected in the public mind. Good candidates will not run because they do not want to get into an "arms" race of this magnitude.

(With concerns) The Washington Public Ports Association has concerns with the bill. Port races are "down-ticket" races. Sometimes there is as much as a 40 percent drop off by the time the voter gets to the bottom of the ballot. Port races are nonpartisan and candidates do not receive party contributions. Most of the public do not give money to port candidates. This is an expensive proposition. There are 13 legislative districts in King County. A single mailing to perfect voters cost about \$40,000. There is a low awareness of port district issues. Limiting contributions will encourage only the wealthy to run for these races. We are not hostile to limits, but would like to work with the committee to determine an appropriate limit for a down-ticket office. What problem are we trying to solve? Contributions are disclosed. More analysis needs to be done to determine the correct level of contributions.

Testimony Against: None.

Persons Testifying: (In support) Representative Schual-Berke, prime sponsor; John Ruhl, King County Bar Association; and David Tarshes, Municipal League of King County.

(In support with amendment) Mark Johnson, Washington State Bar Association.

(With concerns) Pat Jones, Washington Public Ports Association.

Persons Signed In To Testify But Not Testifying: None.