

Big PAC spending in Las Cruces elections gets national attention

Written by By Matthew Reichbach NM Political Report
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LAS CRUCES –The big spending by a political action committee in the recent Las Cruces elections is receiving national attention.

USA Today cited the spending by GOAL WestPAC in trying to defeat incumbent mayor Ken Miyagishima as one way that money is increasingly flooding into local elections.

In New Mexico, the focus of the Goal WestPAC is “the economic and business climate” in the state, said Mark Murphy, the PAC’s chairman and president of Strata Production, an oil-and-gas exploration company in Roswell, N.M., about 180 miles northeast of Las Cruces. Murphy and his company also have donated \$35,000 to the super PAC, records show.

PAC officials decided to target Miyagishima and city politicians over what Murphy called a “history of overregulation and taxation,” including support for a 2013 gross receipts tax.

The PAC spent tens of thousands of dollars on mailers, advertisements and other campaign expenses. Miyagishima, and the two city council candidates targeted by GOAL WestPAC, ended up winning but the spending still showed the effects on campaign spending in a post-*Citizens United* world.

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On the other side, ProgressNow PAC* went to the aid of two city councilors who narrowly won.

Murphy defended the spending in the municipal election despite the fact that the PAC was run by those out of the city and the donations came from those in different areas of the state.

“We have family and friends over there,” he said, calling the super PAC a “great model” for political participation.

Las Cruces Sun-News managing editor Walter Rubel wrote that the out of town origin of the money may have led to the spending backfiring on the PAC.

The effort was not successful. All of those targeted by negative ads went on to claim victory in Tuesday’s election. Given that the attacks were ultimately unsuccessful, it is fair to ask whether the ads hurt or helped the candidates they were seeking to oust.

“I think they hurt me a little bit,” said Ken Miyagishima, who won his third term as mayor by a comfortable margin.

Of course the money came near the end of what was essentially a sleepy race for mayor and became a major storyline in and of itself in the final days (after many had already cast early or absentee ballots, it should be noted).

Increased spending is something that looms large as Democrats and Republicans fight for control of both the state House in Senate in elections that are now less than a year away.

Big spending isn’t new in New Mexico, though it has increased in recent years. Big spending isn’t even new to Murphy.

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In 2008, incumbent House member Dan Foley lost to challenger Dennis Kintigh in a high profile Republican primary in a deep-red district. Murphy and his family were involved in that race, pouring hundreds of thousands of dollars in efforts to defeat Foley and then-State Sen. Rod Adair (Adair won).

New Mexico instituted campaign contribution limits that went into effect after the 2010 elections. The *Citizens United* Supreme Court decision went into effect earlier in 2010 and set the stage for big money moving to Super PACs, which can raise unlimited funds but cannot coordinate with candidates, which can raise unlimited funds but cannot coordinate with candidates.

Another recent election with big money coming in from PACs was an Albuquerque Public Schools Board of Education race. Frequent Martinez critic Kathy Korte lost her position on the school board and blamed Susana PAC for her loss to Peggy Muller-Aragon.

With a key election coming next November, expect to see more of these PACs—on both sides.

**ProgressNow PAC was run by ProgressNow New Mexico. ProgressNow New Mexico helps find funding for NM Political Report but has no editorial control or input on this or any other story, including story selection.*

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