Leon County candidate fundraising lopsided

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Leon County Schools Superintendent Jackie Pons has amassed a nearly $300,000 war chest in his re-election bid against a political newcomer who's raised less than $10,000 in contributions.

Pons raised $295,814 through the latest fundraising period ending Oct. 12, according to campaign-finance reports. Sabrina M. Allen, his opponent, has raised $9,571, roughly 3 percent of Pons' take.

The superintendent's race isn't the only local contest with lopsided contribution totals. Several of the top fundraising candidates running for city and county commission and sheriff have outpaced their opponents by a factor of at least 2 to 1.

With less than a week to go before the general election, the candidates who can afford it are bombarding voters with television and newspaper ads and direct mail pieces, giving them a distinct though not-insurmountable advantage over their lesser-funded rivals.

Davis Houck, professor of communication at Florida State University, said candidates who raise the most cash can boost their name recognition through more and more ad buys and get their message out to the public in an unfiltered way. It can be effective in shaping public perception of the candidates, he said, particularly for busy voters who haven't had time to thoroughly research them.

“I don’t think the person with the most money is always going to win,” Houck said. “But it sure is an enormous advantage.”
Sheriff Larry Campbell has raised $160,961, more than three times the amount of his opponent, Lisa Sprague. Mary Ann Lindley, candidate for an at-large Leon County Commission seat, has collected $105,059, more than twice the total of the incumbent, Commissioner Akin Akinyemi. Former Mayor Scott Maddox, running for Tallahassee City Commission Seat 1, has raised $211,316, more than twice the amount of his opponent, Steve Stewart.

As in past local-election cycles, the candidates with the most cash are filling their coffers with the help of bundlers, who can write checks from themselves and their business entities and deliver many others through friends and family.

The Ghazvini family and its multiple business entities, including Premier Construction and Sandco, gave at least $12,000 to the Pons campaign, delivering 24 checks for $500 apiece, according to Supervisor of Elections records. Rick Kearney, CEO of Mainline Information Systems, and his related businesses gave more than 20 checks totaling $7,250 to the Maddox campaign.

Kevin Wagner, an attorney and associate professor of political science at Florida Atlantic University, said candidates without access to bundlers have a much harder time raising campaign money.

“Because there are limitations on individual contributions, one of the problems in fundraising is it can't be just one or two people you’re going to even if they have a lot of money,” he said. “So the key is really finding people who can locate other people who can contribute.”

**Superintendent race**

Pons, first elected in 2006 to finish the term of retiring Superintendent Bill Montford, hasn’t set a local fundraising record yet. The record still belongs to Leon County Commissioner Bryan Desloge, who raised $372,574 in his race against Will Messer, who raised $307,322.

Some of his biggest contributors are construction businesses who also have thrown their financial support behind a ballot measure to extend a half-percent sales tax for schools, including Culpepper Construction Company, Rogers, Gunter, Vaughn Insurance and Ajax Building Corporation.
Culpepper and related individuals and businesses have given Pons’ campaign $5,500; Rogers, Gunter, Vaughn Insurance gave roughly the same amount, mostly through family members. Ajax Building Corporation gave $2,000. All three have given at least $2,500 toward the sales-tax initiative.

The incumbent got 27 percent of his money, nearly $79,000, from the construction industry. Another 9 percent came from both the real-estate sector and the education field, including a number of Leon County Schools employees.

**City Comm. Seat 1**

Maddox, who served on the City Commission from 1993-2003, has gotten 19 percent of his money from contributors in the legal field and another 19 percent from the real-estate sector. About 10 percent of his contributions came from the construction industry, with 5 percent coming from lobbyists and 4 percent from the insurance field.

Among Maddox’s biggest contributors are Kim Williams, owner of Marpan Supply, and related businesses, which gave $6,250; Talcor Commercial Real Estate and related businesses, which gave $6,000; and Mainline and related firms.

Stewart, who ran for mayor in 2010, has gotten 22 percent of his money from the real-estate field and 14 percent from the construction industry. Another 7 percent came from retirees, with 6 percent apiece coming from the health-care and automotive fields.

Stewart got a dozen checks totaling $6,000 from realtor groups associated with the same address in Orlando and another $2,000 from political committees and organizations registered at a single South Monroe Street address. Erwin Jackson, a businessman who ran for City Commission in 2010, gave Stewart $4,500, mostly from his business entities.

**Sheriff’s race**

Campbell, running for a fifth term against former Florida State University deputy chief Lisa Sprague, got the biggest chunk of his money from law enforcement. More than $22,000, roughly 14 percent of his total take, came from law enforcement, with another
$14,500 or 9 percent coming from the legal field. He got more than 50 contributions from Leon County Sheriff’s Office employees and their family members totaling $9,624.

Sprague, a former Florida State University deputy chief, raised 7 percent of her money from retirees. Another 5 percent came from the legal community, with 3 percent coming from homemakers and educators.