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News Coverage on Campaign Finance

Cuomo Defends Closed Session With Executives and Lobbyists

[Thomas Kaplan](#) [1] [2] [2] [2] [2]

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<http://www.nytimes.com/2012/01/28/nyregion/cuomo-defends-closed-door-session-wit...> [3]

Gov. [Andrew M. Cuomo](#) [4] defended his decision to participate in a closed-door discussion of infrastructure policy on Friday before an audience of deep-pocketed donors, some of whom paid \$50,000 or more to attend, at the same time that his administration is preparing to accelerate billions of dollars of public works projects across New York State.

Neither Mr. Cuomo's office nor the [Democratic Governors Association](#) [5] would allow reporters to attend the panel, which was held in a meeting room at a hotel in Midtown Manhattan. Nor would the association immediately disclose who donated money to gain admittance to the event, which was part of a two-day conference it sponsored.

Over all, the gathering raised about \$1 million to help support the election campaigns of Mr. Cuomo's fellow Democratic governors. The session constituted a relatively standard fund-raiser for the association and groups like it, which can accept unlimited donations.

"I and other governors or elected officials are in rooms with people who do business with government all day long," Mr. Cuomo said after the discussion.

"It's this room, it's every room you walk into," he added. "There are people who do business with the state, and you have to be aware of that, and that's why we have ethics laws and codes of conduct, et cetera."

Mr. Cuomo spoke to reporters who had been restricted to the far end of a hallway where they

could not see people entering and leaving. A representative of the association stood sentry.

For Mr. Cuomo, a prodigious fund-raiser but also a critic of some elements of contemporary political culture, the outward appearance of the event was less than ideal. Just three weeks ago, he proposed lowering contribution limits in the state and putting into effect public financing of elections.

And in his 2010 campaign for governor, he vowed to “[eliminate the ‘pay to play’ culture](#) [6]” in New York, complaining in a campaign policy book that “current election law amplifies the voices of wealthy individuals and special interests.”

The association events give an opportunity for companies and interest groups to spend time with governors. Eight Democratic governors attended the policy discussion in Manhattan, including Martin O’Malley of Maryland. Mr. O’Malley is the chairman of the association and a possible rival to Mr. Cuomo for their party’s presidential nomination in 2016.

Mr. Cuomo was the designated host of the conference, and he also appeared to be its star. Leaving the panel, he shook hands with Gov. Earl Ray Tomblin of West Virginia, whom he greeted as if he were working a rope line. And just before leaving the hotel, he was approached by Gov. Steven L. Beshear, who introduced himself and, apparently doubting whether Mr. Cuomo would recognize his name, hastened to add that he was Kentucky’s governor.

“I know,” Mr. Cuomo responded, before agreeing with Mr. Beshear that the event was a success. (“Good turnout,” Mr. Cuomo said. “Everything seems good.”)

Mr. Cuomo told reporters he did not know how much money lobbyists and others had contributed to attend, and said he was not sure which campaign finance laws applied to the disclosure of those donors. He said at least 200 people were in the audience when he spoke.

“One of the things we have to work on is getting money out of politics,” Mr. Cuomo said. He added:

“I have my own ideas on what I’d like to see the law to be in this state, and that’s why we need finance reform, et cetera, in this state. But the federal finance laws, that’s someone else’s problem.”

Former Gov. Howard Dean of Vermont, who was once chairman of the association and moderated another panel discussion at the conference, acknowledged that it was “nice for the corporate leaders to be able to have access to the governors.” But he added that conferences could be “pretty substantive,” despite the fund-raising that motivated them.

“I prefer public financing of campaigns, but that’s not the situation that we have,” Mr. Dean said in an interview. He added that “to paraphrase” former Defense Secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld, “you go to campaigns with the laws that you have, not the laws you wish you had.”

Another governor who attended, Pat Quinn of Illinois, said he also found the conferences to have a practical value, noting that “when you bring creative governors together with creative people,

you get a lot of ideas.”

But Mr. Quinn, who served last year as the association’s finance chairman, also acknowledged their dual benefit.

“I think what a lot of unions, businesses and individuals see is governors are in an arena where they can make things happen in a relatively short period of time,” he said in an interview. “Sometimes the federal government is so vast, it’s hard to see immediate results.”

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[3] <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/01/28/nyregion/cuomo-defends-closed-door-session-with-executives-and-lobbyists.html>

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[5] <http://www.democraticgovernors.org/home>

[6] <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2011-04-26/cuomo-makes-pay-to-play-ban-permanent-for-new-york-pension-fund-business.html>