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Opinion Editorial on Campaign Finance

The Governor and the Committee

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<http://www.nytimes.com/2012/06/06/opinion/gov-cuomo-and-the-committee.html?hp> ^[3]

When Andrew Cuomo was running for governor of New York in 2010, he printed eight books describing his priorities. Many were excellent ideas, including campaign finance reform, ethics reform, balancing the budget, ending pay-to-play, getting government to work. Nowhere in those books was there a word about casinos.

So it was a surprise to many when Mr. Cuomo, in [his State of the State address](#) ^[4] this year, made expanding casino gambling a top priority on his agenda. Now we learn that the gambling industry has been very generous to the governor's cause.

[The Times reported on Tuesday](#) ^[5] that an industry trade group donated \$2 million last year to [the Committee to Save New York](#) ^[6], a group organized at Mr. Cuomo's urging to promote the governor's policies and praise his performance with campaign-style political ads. Genting, a gambling company that helped found the industry trade group, contributed an additional \$400,000.

Through his spokesman, Mr. Cuomo has strongly denied that there is any connection between the gambling donations and his enthusiasm for legalizing Las Vegas-style casinos. The spokesman said the governor had been considering ways to manage and expand gambling in New York for months before the industry's donations.

But even in the slush fields of Albany, \$2.4 million is a lot of money. And because the Committee

to Save New York is registered as a tax-exempt social welfare organization, called a 501(c)(4), it has not been required until now to publicly disclose its donors.

In March — two months after Mr. Cuomo’s speech — the Legislature endorsed a constitutional amendment that could eventually allow up to seven Las Vegas-style casinos. The amendment must be approved again next year by lawmakers and then go to state voters. But the gambling industry clearly has a lot of new friends in Albany. And the committee, which had been focused on promoting a property tax cap and reduced state spending, has now added the constitutional amendment to its list of Mr. Cuomo’s legislative successes on its Web site.

New Yorkers can and should have a serious debate about expanded gambling — its potential economic value to the state and its potential social costs. But there should be no debate about New Yorkers’ need to know who is contributing millions to promote what political issues.

The Committee to Save New York raised \$17 million last year and spent nearly \$12 million — much of it on pro-Cuomo ads — making it the biggest spender on lobbying in Albany.

Cuomo administration officials argue that the governor pushed hard for ethics reform last year that, among other things, would require 501(c)(4) groups to disclose their donors. The legislation has a worrisome loophole that allows donors to remain secret if disclosure could lead to them being harassed or threatened. That is the claim made by business groups at the national level that are fighting disclosure. Meanwhile, New York’s new ethics committee has yet to write the disclosure rules.

Mr. Cuomo does not need to wait for that to happen. He can demonstrate his commitment to reform by pushing his friends at the committee to disclose all of its donors right now.

Under the Internal Revenue Code, all 501(c)(4)s are required to have a social welfare purpose that is not primarily political. We are eager to know what that purpose is for the committee, beyond supporting Mr. Cuomo and promoting the interests of its contributors.

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