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News Coverage on Campaign Finance

New York's porous campaign-finance laws apparent in disclosure reports

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<http://www.theithacajournal.com/article/20120803/NEWS01/308030087/1124/?gcheck=1...> ^[3]

ALBANY — Flowers, cigars, fancy dinners and legal fees were all put on New York lawmakers' campaign bills during the last year, according to disclosure reports filed this year.

Sen. Thomas W. Libous, R-Binghamton, spent more than \$12,000 at restaurants, not including for fundraisers, most in his hometown or in Albany — even though lawmakers get \$165 a day for expenses when they are at the state capital.

Libous also spent \$30,000 on lawyers, \$2,900 on steak sauce, \$1,400 on flowers, \$1,300 on candy and \$650 on cigars.

And he's not the only one who likes to dine out, according to a review of the disclosure reports by Gannett's Albany Bureau.

Sen. Greg Ball, R-Carmel, Putnam County, spent more than \$9,000 at restaurants last year, and Assemblyman George Latimer, D-Rye, Westchester County, spent more than \$2,300 at restaurants. Neither figure includes expenditures at restaurants that were noted for fundraising.

Assemblywoman Donna Lupardo, D-Endwell, spent nearly \$1,000 on an order from Hot Shots Hot Sauce, based in Charlotte, N.C. Lupardo said the hot sauce is given to attendees at her annual campaign fundraiser, which was held Thursday.

"They're astonishing, but permitted expenses," said Dick Dadey, [executive director](#) ^[4] of Citizens

Union, a civic organization that advocates for political reform. “Donors to political campaigns think they’re giving so staffs can get the message out, not to such questionable expenses.”

Dadey said candidates’ expenditures of campaign funds highlight the need to change New York’s laws.

Current law requires legislators to reveal how they spent their cash, but good-government advocates often criticize that the twice-yearly disclosures are less than transparent — and the [money](#) ^[4] goes to plenty of items other than campaigning. They are pushing for campaign-finance reform that would lower New York’s contribution limits — now more than \$60,000 for a gubernatorial candidate — and tighten regulations on how campaign cash can be spent.

Bill Mahoney, [research](#) ^[4] coordinator for the New York Public Interest Research Group, said rules governing how lawmakers report their spending would work well if they were followed or enforced. “But few of the legislators actually follow them, and they wind up writing down their expenditures in the most opaque way possible,” Mahoney said.

Also, the laws are so broadly written, that campaign money can be used for just about anything. Lawmakers can spend campaign [cash](#) ^[4] as long as it’s related “to a political campaign or the holding of a public office or party position.”

And when public officials leave [office](#) ^[4], there’s nothing that prevents them from continuing to spend the money.

Former Sen. George Winner, R-Elmira, who retired in 2010, still has \$112,082 in his campaign chest. He spent about \$20,000 this year — including \$10,000 to Elmira College and \$1,000 to the Friends of Natural Gas political action committee.

Disclosure reports show how much money lawmakers spent where, but the forms require little information on what they purchased or why. They must file purchases with vague purpose descriptors, such as “fundraising” or “constituent services” — descriptions that Mahoney said are hardly used correctly. “Other” is a choice, too.

Purchases less than \$50 do not need to be itemized and may be lumped into one figure, noted as “unitemized.” For campaigns that spend a lot, the “unitemized” expenses can add up.

Critics said the loose definitions don’t give the public a way of knowing whether a receipt for an airline ticket to New York City was for a legislative conference or a family trip to the Hamptons.

Dadey said: “No one is verifying whether these purchases comply with the law, and the fact that no one is reviewing them gives license to committees and candidates to spend money in ways that may not be right.”

Restaurant charges are an example of how lawmakers might be using campaign funds for personal expenses, Dadey said. Lawmakers also might be “double dipping,” as they might collect per diems for expenses that they end up charging to their campaign.

Libous spent \$12,362 at restaurants in Binghamton, Albany and establishments in other states, such as a deli in Ann Arbor, Mich., Zingerman's, that appears on his disclosure report three times. He dined at the Iron Gate Cafe in Albany, a trendy sandwich eatery near the Capitol, a dozen times.

"We use Friends of Senator Libous Committee to pay for official business and campaign-related expenses," the senator's spokesman, Emmanuel Priest, said in an e-mail. "This may include [technology](#) [4], travel, meals, accommodations, etc."

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