

Nevada lawmakers pulling in money from PACs

By Sean Whaley, Nevada News Bureau

CARSON CITY – They have names like “A Better Nevada PAC”, “A Bolder Nevada” and “The Nevada Hispanic Legislative Caucus”.

They are all political action committees formed or renewed by state lawmakers this year to help promote their parties, push their candidates and protect their ranks in an effort to maintain and/or win control of the Assembly and Senate.

In all there are more than 20 PACs representing two dozen incumbent state senators and members of the Assembly filed with the Secretary of State’s office for the 2012 election season. There are more than 260 PACs in total filed with the office this year.

The Better Nevada PAC was formed by former state Sen. Sheila Leslie, a Democrat who resigned her seat to run for the Senate 15 seat in Reno now held by Sen. Greg Brower, a Republican. The purpose of the PAC is “to support candidates working to better the quality of life indicators in the state of Nevada.”

The Bolder Nevada PAC was formed by state Sen. Joe Hardy, R-Boulder City, “to promote good government at all levels.” Hardy, in the middle of a four-year term in the state Senate, is not up for election this year. He is affiliated with several other PACs as well.

The Nevada Hispanic Legislative Caucus, newly formed in April to support the election of Hispanic candidates to state and local offices, has as its officers three Southern Nevada Democratic Assemblywomen: Irene Bustamante Adams, Lucy Flores and Olivia Diaz. All three are running for re-election this year.

The traditional process for candidates to win election is to receive contributions directly from donors, but there are limits on the amounts that can be accepted. The other standard process is for the Senate and Assembly GOP and Democratic caucuses to form PACs to accept funds for distribution to their candidates. Many of the PACs registered with the Secretary of State's office are these leadership groups.

But other PACs are being formed by individual lawmakers or groups of lawmakers such as the Battle Born Leadership Group formed by Assemblyman John Hambrick, R-Las Vegas, and the Lighthouse Leadership PAC formed by Assemblywoman Debbie Smith, D-Sparks, who is running for a seat in the state Senate.

The JOBS FIRST PAC was established by GOP Sens. Michael Roberson, Greg Brower and Ben Kieckhefer to "promote pro-business public policies in Nevada." It has \$10,000 so far, donated in turn by the Nevadans First PAC, which was run by former Assemblywoman Heidi Gansert, who is now Gov. Brian Sandoval's chief of staff.

These PACs serve an important purpose for financing campaigns. They give state lawmakers the ability to bring in large donations than candidates cannot accept individually due to contribution limits. The money can then be distributed to party candidates in critical races. They also allow the individual officers of the PACS to wield more political influence by doling out the dough.

Another advantage is that PACs allow donors who may not want to be reported as having contributed to a specific candidate or candidates to do so through a third party.

The growing trend of such PACs was recently noted by *Las Vegas Sun* columnist Jon Ralston.

Republican political consultant Ryan Erwin said legislative leaders and caucuses from both parties have used PACs for a

long time to help fund targeted races.

“As term limits and now redistricting create shorter term leaders we will continue to see more leadership PACs evolve,” he said. “In Nevada, which has lenient campaign finance and reporting laws, the emergence of additional vehicles to raise and spend money will continue to have a more prominent role in the process.”

There is a lot at stake in the 2012 election, with Senate Democrats trying to hold on to or even expand their razor-thin 11-10 majority while Republicans are seeking to regain control, and where Assembly Republicans are trying to make a dent in the 26-16 Democrat advantage in the 42-member house.

Hambrick, who has the luxury of not facing an opponent in his re-election bid this year, said a PAC provides more options to support party candidates than direct contributions can do. PACs are limited in the amount they can donate to a candidate, but there is no restriction on the use of the funds spent by a PAC directly for polling or other campaign related activities.

“It’s another avenue for particularly candidates that may not attract some of the deep pocket donors to at least get something to help pay for a mailer or to get some signs out,” Hambrick said. “If you look at my PAC compared to Joe Hardy’s you’ll see a significant difference. But I get a little bit of money that can help out.”

PACs are required to report donations and expenditures just like candidates, he said.

“Every dime has to be accounted for,” Hambrick said.

Hambrick reported just over \$9,000 in donations to his PAC in 2011.

Leslie said she has not been actively seeking contributions to her PAC because she is focused on her own campaign.

“It is a way to collect additional funding outside the campaign limits in a legal way,” Leslie said in an email response. “It is also useful for some corporations who don’t want to be identified as supporting a particular candidate for various reasons. It also allows those in leadership to collect funds for other candidates and earn their loyalty and support.”