



The Regional Reporter

www.rra.org

APRIL 2002

Campaign financing

What to watch for now and later

By SUSAN ROTH
Gannett News Service

With the passage of campaign finance reforms that will be effective after the November elections, this year is the last hurrah for the funding system that's been in place for 25 years – and the last time reporters will be able to use past experience to track campaign money.

At a March conference put on by the University of Maryland and the Center for Responsive Politics, the nonpartisan, non-profit research group, about 50 of us were treated to experts'

tips on what to look for this year, and predictions on what may be coming next.

A current problem noted by Jim Drinkard of USA Today is that many congressional leaders are setting up political action committees in their home states, in addition to their leadership PACs here in D.C. This way, they can get even more soft money and it's much harder for Washington reporters to track it without visiting the states.

Bob Biersack of the Federal Election Commission repeated

See [FINANCING](#) on Page 2

Key reporting tool might be taken away

A court ruling could hamper regional reporters by keeping shut records of Federal Election Commission campaign finance investigations.

[Story, Page 3](#)



[Farm bill provision would cut access to environmental records, 4](#)

[Consolidated Federal Funds report now available through Census Bureau, 5](#)

[Meeting minutes, 2](#) ■ [Restive regions, 2](#) ■ [Web link, 3](#) ■ [Paul Miller Fellowship deadline, 5](#)

MEETING MINUTES

APRIL 1

Lisa Friedman, Jessica Wehrman, Susan Roth, Marc Heller, Angela Greiling, Kevin Goldberg, Jeff Miller, Brett Lieberman, Carl Weiser, Samantha Young, Jake Thompson.

Friedman opened the meeting by asking Lieberman about the soon-to-be updated RRA Web site. Lieberman said the Web guru hired to redesign the site is tinkering around on a mirror site, investigating whether it will be better to put a chat group on the site or use the existing Yahoo chat group.

Weiser asked if the new site could accept credit card numbers for RRA dues. Lieberman said they could do that with the program PayPal, but it would cost the RRA 50 cents to 75 cents extra per credit card order accepted online. Lieberman said the association could charge \$21 in dues paid online or keep the fee at \$20. He asked people to check out the site and email him with suggestions.

Miller asked if the site could include government press secretaries.

Wehrman said she had access to a list of press numbers and would email it to Lieberman or Friedman.

Goldberg said board member Rachel Smolkin would be able to stay on the board under board bylaws. Smolkin recently left her position in the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette/Toledo Blade bureau to freelance. Goldberg said the bylaws do not specify what sort of group board members must report for – just that they must do regional work.

Greiling said not everyone has paid their RRA dues and said she would like to send a reminder to association members to pay their dues.

Young said she is working on a Drug Enforcement Agency newsmaker and a Federal Emergency Management Agency newsmaker, and plans so far are going well.

The next meeting is May 6.

FINANCING

Continued from Page 1

that all-important FEC press office phone number and Web site: 694-1220; www.fec.gov

Though the commission itself may be growing less responsive to violations of federal election law, the FEC staff remains super helpful to reporters. For example, though it's difficult for correspondents unfamiliar with all the FEC forms to find soft money reports, the FEC separates them out for us.

Both Biersack and Drinkard told us to look out for increased bundling – bunches of donations from political groups such as Emily's List or employees at one company. That multiplies the clout of the group or the company, because the lawmaker will know that he's received a chunk of money from that one organization.

David Magleby of Brigham Young University believes that candidates and parties will be doing more mailings and phoning this year. Many of the mailings will likely be oversized or somehow different so they literally stick out, Magleby predicted. Look closely and you can tell which ones were bought with soft money – they're clearly campaign ads but don't use the magic words "vote for," "elect," "defeat," "support," or "reject."

Looking toward the future, Paul Herrnson of the University of Maryland did research showing that the rising hard-money limits allowed in the campaign reform legislation may not neces-

sarily result in more hard-money donations, especially for Democrats. He found a "clear rightward tilt to those who said they would give more money" if they could, while lefties said they would not give more because of disillusionment with the system.

Jeff Birnbaum of Fortune Magazine forecasted skyrocketing hard-money donations. He started a mantra that was repeated by other speakers – "the important people in campaign fundraising are not those with the big wallets but the ones with the large Rolodexes."

George W. Bush's effective fundraising "pioneers" were just the start, Birnbaum said. The key to future campaign success will be finding more people who will contribute the maximum amount of hard money. That will help Republicans, while for Democrats, "special interest groups will become the new piggy banks," he said.

The end result of the campaign finance reforms will be a "deeper fragmentation of the political process," with all the money more difficult to track, Birnbaum asserted. He also reminded us that while it may seem like corporations are spending huge amounts of money on campaigns, "those are tiny amounts compared to what's at stake, and nothing compared to corporate profits" – the profits they would reap if they get the legislation they want.

RESTIVE REGIONS

Jason Marsden, formerly Washington correspondent for the Casper (Wyo.) Star-Tribune, has joined the Wyoming Sierra Club.

Mike Magner, who covered Michigan for Booth Newspapers, has joined the Natural Resources Defense Council.

Billy House, who left Gannett News Service three years ago to attend law school, is returning to Gannett to write for the Arizona Republic.

The Regional Reporter is published monthly by the Regional Reporters Association for its members. Please direct mail to:

Regional Reporters Association
Ben Franklin Station
P.O. Box 254
Washington, DC 20044-0254

Direct newsletter inquiries to newsletter editor Susan Roth at sroth@gns.gannett.com or layout editor Jim Sergent at jjsergent@earthlink.net.

Find us on the Web: www.ra.org.



WEB LINK

Here are a few useful sites on evergreen issues for Washington reporters: campaign finance regulations and enforcement, writing and politics.

www.fecwatch.org

The innovative folks at the Center for Responsive Politics rolled this site out recently. It's linkable from the center's popular www.opensecrets.org site. With battle lines being drawn over the way both old and new campaign finance laws are enforced, this should be a valuable resource for all regional reporters.

www.newsthinking.com

Bob Baker, an editor and writing coach at the Los Angeles Times, offers tips of the writing trade. "Why are we meeting at this Web site? Because you've felt the most important tremor in the business: You're not as good as you want to be." Nuff said.

<http://www.rice2008.com/>

Forget about 2002 or 2004. This site is way out in front of the curve on the presidential campaign two cycles hence, and it seeks to persuade Condi Rice to toss her mortar board in the ring. The site also has a bunch of political links.

— Jeff Miller
Allentown Morning Call

Federal Election Commission investigations

Closure of documents could leave reporters without valuable resource

By SUZANNE GAMBOA
Associated Press

WASHINGTON — A Federal Election Commission tool often used by regional reporters for stories on their congressional delegations would be closed to the public if a lower court's ruling is upheld.

The records are of FEC campaign finance investigations. They are open to public scrutiny once the investigation ends, regardless of the outcome.

But in December, U.S. District Judge Gladys Kessler ordered the FEC to withhold thousands of pages about its inquiry into political coordination

between the Democratic National Committee and the AFL-CIO. The FEC has appealed the decision and the ruling will set a precedent for future release of documents.

Jonathan Salant, former Regional Reporters Association president, said the documents are a valuable resource for regional reporters.

"I got one of my best stories that way," Salant said.

Salant culled FEC documents from the commission's investigation of then-Republican National Committee Chairman Haley Barbour and found that the RNC was arguing that foreign money contributions were not covered under federal campaign finance law.

At the time Republicans were heavily criticizing then-Attorney General Janet Reno, who used the same argument in deciding not to investigate foreign soft money contributions to Democrats.

"We got some really good stories,

because the paperwork is open because we know what the arguments are and I would not have gotten this story had they kept them closed," Salant said.

The FEC declined comment on the pending appeal, but has said that much of the information in the Democratic National Committee and AFL-CIO

inquiry already is in the public domain. The commission has ruled that the coordination between the AFL-CIO and Democratic National Committee was legal.

The DNC and AFL-CIO contended that the documents contain proprietary and strategic information.

The FEC told The Associated Press the ruling left the commission

in a Catch-22. If it agreed to the ruling, public interest groups and media organizations would likely sue. If it didn't appeal, others subject to inquiries would sue to shield their documents.

Often documents from FEC investigations give reporters an understanding of the commissioners' deliberations, Salant said.

But in siding with the AFL-CIO and Democrats, Kessler said there must be a claim of illegal activity for the court to consider revealing the names of union officials involved in the investigation.

The judge wrote that the FEC's disclosure of investigation records "carries with it a real potential for chilling the free exercise of political speech and association guarded by the First Amendment."

Find Kessler's ruling at

<http://www.dcd.uscourts.gov/01-1552.pdf>. The FEC's Web site is at <http://www.fec.gov>.

in December, U.S. District Judge Gladys Kessler ordered the FEC to withhold thousands of pages about its inquiry into political coordination between the Democratic National Committee and the AFL-CIO.

Farm bill provision would cut access to environmental records

By KEVIN GOLDBERG
Cohn and Marks

Reporters interested in accessing \$44 billion worth of environmental records could face a major roadblock inserted in the Agriculture, Conservation and Rural Enhancement Act of 2001, otherwise known as the farm bill.

S. 1731, introduced by Sen. Tom Harkin, D-Iowa and supported by the Senate leadership, contains a provision that would exempt from public access data related to taxpayer-funded conservation programs.

Specifically, Section 204(g) would exempt from the Freedom of Information Act all information developed by the United States Department of Agriculture regarding natural resources programs administered by the Natural Resources Conservation Service or the Farm Service Agency. Those programs are expected to provide more than \$4 billion per year to farmers over the next decade.

Of particular concern to reporters covering rural or suburban communities may be the lack of access to a survey of environmental indicators conducted by the Natural Resources Conservation Service. The survey takes data from 800,000 places to measure things like soil erosion, habitat diversity and conservation practices.

If the bill passes as written, that information would only be available in aggregate - meaning it could effectively prevent reporters and the public from determining if a specific problem, like groundwater pollution, exists in their area.

The access provided by S. 1731 to aggregated data is akin to no access at all. Any measure of accountability for pollution problems in a local community would be impossible to trace.

The further danger is that this bill appears to continue a trend in Congress allowing government agencies to keep environmental and public safety information secret. Two examples are instructive:

■ The Chemical Safety Information and Site Security Act of 1999. Under the Clean Air Act of 1990, every chemical facility in the nation was to file risk management plans with the Environmental Protection Agency. The agency planned to post those plans online. The information would have alerted people to the worst-case damage scenarios in the event of an accident at a chemical plant. But Congress passed the Chemical Safety Information and Site Security Act and exempted those management plans from public access.

■ Legislation introduced this session in the House by Reps. Tom Davis, R-Va., and Jim Moran, D-Va., (H. 2435) and in the Senate by Sens. Bob Bennett, R-Utah, and Jon Kyl, R-Ariz., (S.1456) would allow private companies to share information with the government regarding possible security problems affecting the

See **FARM** on Page 5

Apply now for Paul Miller Fellowships

The National Press Foundation is accepting applications for the 2002-2003 Paul Miller Washington Reporting Fellowships, which will begin in September and run through next May.

This series of free, monthly, one-day seminars is for regional reporters new to Washington.

Now in its 16th year, the Paul Miller program has become a valuable rite of passage. Miller fellows learn from veteran colleagues, officials and experts how to mine the nation's capital for important local news. Former fellows laud the information and story ideas, but what can be at least as helpful is the instant

How to apply

When: 5 p.m. June 7.

Where: Send applications to the National Press Foundation, Paul Miller Fellowships, 1211 Connecticut Ave., NW, Suite 310, Washington, D.C. 20036.

E-mail: npf@nationalpress.org.

Fax: 202-530-2855.

More information: Call Nolan Walters, 202-530-5355 x103. Check www.nationalpress.org.

network of correspondents.

Fifteen regional reporters will be selected competitively. Supervisors must agree to allow reporters to attend seminars, and reporters must attend.

Send a letter stating why you wish to attend, a letter of support from your supervisor, a brief bio and three clips or tapes. Applications will not be returned.

The Paul Miller Washington Reporting Fellowships program is supported by endowment grants from the Freedom Forum and from the National Press

Foundation's Program Fund. The National Press Foundation is a non-profit educational foundation.

Federal Fund report available

By MAUREEN GROPPE
Gannett News Service

The \$1 million secured by the congressman you cover for a new bridge in your city is easy to track and write about. But what about the more than \$1 trillion in federal funds distributed around the country each year?

That's where the Census Bureau comes in. The bureau each year releases a Consolidated Federal Funds Report detailing that spending. This year's report covering 2001 spending is available now at <http://www.census.gov/govs/www/cffr.html>

Stories generated from the release can be quick hits, such as where your state ranks in per capita funding. The rankings don't change much from year to year. So if you write for Alaska, Virginia, Maryland, New Mexico or Hawaii, chances are

you've already told your readers how well they're doing compared with most other states.

The reports have been published since 1983 if you want to make historical comparisons. You can look at overall spending, or spending broken down by agency or type of expenditure.

If you really want to dig into the dollars, the report is great because it breaks down spending at the county level.

I've done stories looking at per capita spending and tax collection in one county (how much is coming in versus how much is going out – the latter of which is not part of the CFFR report). My stories broke out the largest federal programs in the county and the smallest. Because I wrote them when Republicans were trying to balance the budget by reducing spending, I was also able to write about what local spending was most at risk.

FARM

Continued from Page 4

nation's critical infrastructures. However, the bill would also exempt that information from the FOIA, preventing the public from finding out that these problems – mainly involving cyber-security breakdowns – even pose a danger to water, telecommunications, highway, financial or other infrastructures.

Opponents of the farm bill provision – mainly environmental right to know groups – were trying to get it removed from the bill in conference committee, as the House version, H. 2646, did not contain the same provision. But it appears that the section survived the conference battle.

MEMBERSHIP APPLICATION

Please fill in the following information and return it with your \$20 dues payment to:
The Regional Reporters Association, Ben Franklin Station, P.O. Box 254 Washington, DC 20044-0254

Name: _____

Organization: _____ DOB: _____

Address: _____

City,State: _____ ZIP code: _____

Office Phone: _____ Home Phone: _____

Fax: _____ email: _____

New applicant Renewal

Please list the publications or stations that you work for, including city and state:
