

Memo Re Clean Campaign Pledge

To: Lake Wales Commission Members

The pledge submitted herewith for your consideration is a slightly revised version of the pledge previously submitted by Vice Mayor Gibson but withdrawn by him before the Commission could act on it. I commend the Vice Mayor for his thoughtful craftsmanship in preparing the pledge and trust that my revision will help to address any concerns raised in our discussion of the original version.

The need for this pledge arose from the extensive use of “dark money” in recent commission elections. Florida law requires that materials distributed by a candidate for public office identify the person or organization publishing the materials, including the candidate’s official campaign organization. This requirement helps to ensure that voters will know what interest groups are helping to elect local candidates so that they can determine whether the candidate may be biased in favor of those special interests. However, if a third party or a political action committee not affiliated with a candidate publishes materials supporting the candidate, only the third party’s name is required. Although the reporting rules for third party PAC’s do require certain financial disclosures, in practice, the information publicly available regarding the funding of these PACs does not disclose the interests that organized the PAC or the individuals who contributed to it. In order to avoid disclosing the true sources of their funding, the PACs adopt ambiguous names such as “Citizens for Good Government,” which may very well be a pseudonym for a special interest group seeking to influence local government by electing candidates sympathetic to their views.

In a town the size of Lake Wales, it is difficult for candidates lacking special interest funding to compete with candidates whose campaigns are heavily funded by third party PACs. An individual who must rely on donations by his or her supporters cannot approach the amount of funding provided by a dark money PAC and therefore cannot nearly match the expenditures made on behalf of candidates supported by the PAC’s. As a result, our elections are not fair but are influenced by the special interests that fund the PAC’s, to the detriment of candidates who lack such funding.

The proposed pledge will not remedy this disparity, but it may cause candidates to be more careful in their actions regarding third party PAC's. My revision to this pledge does not make the candidate responsible for the accuracy of materials distributed by third parties, but only for those published by their own campaigns. The pledge is not legally binding, but by requesting candidates to read and sign it, the pledge will make them aware that in our city, we are serious about holding elections that are fair to all and are not biased in favor of special interests who hope to procure favors from the candidates whom they support. By making this request, we are not trying to get any candidate into trouble, but rather to make all candidates appreciate the important roles that they play in ensuring that Lake Wales elections are fair and responsive to the needs of our citizens rather than to the interests of moneyed groups supporting any one candidate.