$900K raised to publicize higher ed bond issue

Some donors have stake in approval of N.J. referendum

By Kelly Heyboer
STAR-LEDGER STAFF

The newly formed political committee created to persuade voters to approve the higher education bond question on the Nov. 6 ballot has already raised nearly $900,000 in donations from labor, education and industry groups banking on the referendum passing.

Building Our Future, a bipartisan group formed to push for passage of the ballot question, listed PSE&G, William Paterson University and the New Jersey State Electrical Workers as some of its first big donors, according to the committee’s initial filing with the state Election Law Enforcement Commission.

The group has a few weeks to use the cash to persuade voters to pass a higher education ballot question that would allow the state to borrow $750 million to fund construction projects at New Jersey’s public and private colleges.

“As you can see, the committee is fully transparent and shows a strong cross-section of business, labor and other supporters,” said Bill Hildebrand, Building Our Future’s spokesman. “It also demonstrates that this capital investment is critical for New Jersey’s ability to compete for the jobs, research, innovations and economic investments of the future.”

There is no organized opposition to the ballot question. But supporters are worried voters skittish about the stagnant economy will balk at authorizing the state to take on $750 million in more debt to help the colleges.

Though the election is less than three weeks away, a poll taken earlier this month by Fairleigh Dickinson University’s PublicMind found 87 percent of registered voters knew “little” or “nothing” about the higher education bond question.

Yesterday, Building Our Future helped organize a tour of an aging building at William Paterson University in Wayne to show why voters should approve the bond referendum.

Senate President Stephen Sweeney (D-Gloucester) and Senate Republican Leader Tom Kean Jr. (R-Union) toured the school’s nursing school labs with Kathleen Waldron, the public university’s president. She said the school would make desperately needed updates to the building if the bond question passes.

“We’re going to go and promote this as much as we can,” Sweeney said before a crowd of reporters, photographers and television crews. “We need to get the word out and we are doing it.”

Most of Building Our Future’s donors have a financial stake in the passage of referendum, which could create dozens of large construction projects on college campuses across the state.

The group’s first donors include: PSE&G ($200,000), New Jersey Carpenter Contractor Network ($100,000), New Jersey Resources ($100,000), Northeast Regional Council of Carpenters PAC ($100,000), New Jersey State Electrical...
Workers ($100,000) and the American Federation of Teachers New Jersey ($10,000).

William Paterson University was the first higher education institution to donate to the cause, with a $33,000 check, according to the ELEC filing. University officials said the money came from private donations to the William Paterson Foundation, the school’s nonprofit fundraising arm.

"No university funds — including tuition and fees or taxpayer dollars — were used," said Stuart Goldstein, William Paterson’s associate vice president for marketing and public relations.

So far, Building our Future has spent nearly $188,000 of the donations, according to the ELEC filing. The initial expenses included $60,750 on polling, $52,600 on consultants, $18,000 on the group’s new website and $6,250 on campaign literature.

The $750 million would be split among New Jersey’s public and private colleges to build or renovate classroom and lab buildings.

Public research universities, including Rutgers, would get $300 million. The other public four-year colleges would split $247.5 million. County colleges would get $150 million and private colleges would get $52.5 million. Princeton University, the state’s wealthiest school, will be excluded.