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LEGISLATURE 2003

Banned campaign gifts may resume

By Bob Mahlburg
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TALLAHASSEE -- A fund-raising method outlawed more than a decade ago to limit the influence of big corporations and unions in Florida politics would be brought back to life under a surprise measure endorsed Tuesday by a Senate committee.

The bill(SB 1500) sponsored by Sen. Anna Cowin, R-Leesburg, would re-establish "leadership funds," a tool banned in 1989 to try to limit corporate contributions in state elections.

"It's a step back to the Dark Ages," said Ben Wilcox, executive director of Common Cause of Florida. "It allows the leadership to strong-arm special interests for their campaigns."

The wording to revive "leadership funds" was slipped into a blank "shell bill" along with technical election changes without warning on Tuesday, Wilcox complained. Even late Tuesday, the full text of the proposal on the legislative Web site simply read: "An act relating to elections; expressing the legislative intent to revise laws relating to elections."

Lawmakers say they need such blank bills for last-minute technical changes, but Wilcox said the measure was sprung on the public.

In the past, legislative leaders used leadership funds to funnel campaign contributions to their favorite candidates.

Senate President Jim King, R-Jacksonville, said last month that he might want to bring back such funds because he thinks it would make it easier to track contributions to leaders, and how that money is spent on candidates.

Currently, corporate and union contributions are given to state political parties instead of candidates. King said that makes it difficult to know who gave the money and who got it.

Cowin on Tuesday made a similar argument, saying the change would help "show where that money goes."

"It's good in its own way," Cowin said. "It really does give more openness. As it is now, you can give to parties and almost launder the money."

Wilcox said the measure would increase corporate influence and hide donations from disclosure.

"They wouldn't get to see who contributed until after the general election," Wilcox said.

Cowin said she also has some concerns about making information available. She said she has agreed to meet with Wilcox and may modify the bill to require earlier disclosure of contributors.

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