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Burlington IRV draws outside money

By John Briggs, Free Press Staff Writer

The group fighting to retain instant-runoff voting for mayor in Burlington, 50 Percent Matters, is funded largely by non-Burlington groups.

About 78 percent of the \$14,819 the group has raised comes from sources from outside Burlington. That includes \$5,000 from the nonprofit advocacy organization Vermont Public Interest Research Group and \$6,500 from Fairvote, a Takoma, Md., group that supports election reform.

The group calling for the repeal of IRV brought in about 17 percent of the money it reported last week from sources outside the city.

VPIRG Executive Director Paul Burns said his group might contribute as much as \$5,000 more to the Burlington campaign to retain IRV. "This of course is part of our broader work on government reform," he said.

He said VPIRG is concerned to limit the influence of "big money" in elections and called the IRV debate in Burlington a "key issue." VPIRG's Web site says the group was formed in Vermont in 1972 and is "the largest nonprofit consumer and environmental advocacy organization in Vermont." Burns said he is on the steering committee of 50 Percent Matters.

Rob Richie, the executive director of Fairvote, said locals in Burlington reached out to Fairvote for information and money.

"This is something we care about," he said in a phone interview Tuesday. Burlington voters are about to make a choice that could have statewide or even national implications, **Richie** said.

Instant-runoff voting, used in the Burlington mayor's campaigns in 2006 and 2009, allows voters to rank their choice of candidates. In successive rounds of computer tallying of the votes, the candidates with the lowest totals are eliminated, and their supporters' next preferences are added to one of the remaining candidates' totals. The instant runoffs continue until one candidate receives more than 50 percent of the vote.

Opponents of the system gathered some 2,000 signatures from registered voters to put the issue on the ballot. They argue the system allows a candidate preferred by a minority of voters to win by adding votes in successive rounds that, they say, are blind runoffs, in that voters don't know in advance which candidates will remain in a second or third round of vote tallying.

The Campaign Finance Disclosure Form filed Monday by 50 Percent Matters lists a \$5,000 contribution from VPIRG and total contributions of \$8,319.

Helen Hossley, the paid campaign manager for the group, said initially that Fairvote had not made a contribution. Asked about Richie's statement that Fairvote had contributed \$6,500, she said she had spoken earlier just about the contributions listed on the pre-election form. Fairvote's donation arrived after that form was filed. A final report will be filed after the election. The forms require itemization of all contributions of more than \$100.

If VPIRG contributes additional money to 50 Percent Matters, that will not be reported until after Tuesday's voting.

On its Web site, www.50percentmatters.com, 50 Percent Matters describes itself as a "grassroots" organization. **Hossley** said that although the money for the group is coming from non-Burlington sources, "local" is a matter of definition. She said she considers Vermont contributions to be local.

Repeal Instant Runoff Voting, the group that placed the issue on the March 2 ballot, reported a total of \$5,850 in contributions as of Thursday. John Ewing, the group's treasurer, said Tuesday that they've received an additional \$950 in contributions since filing the report, for a total of \$6,800. The form lists a total of \$1,000 from out-of-town sources: \$500 from Bill Hauke Jr., \$200 from Harlan Sylvester and \$300 from Leonore Broughton, all of Colchester.

Sam Osborne, one of the leaders of the Repeal IRV group, was unaware of the Fairvote contribution when he spoke to The Burlington Free Press on Tuesday. He criticized the VPIRG involvement. The \$5,000 contribution, he said, "makes them the largest donor on either side, into what is essentially a local election-format dispute."

Rep. Jason Lorber, a leader of 50 Percent Matters, said the group is "happy to get support for this issue" from Fairvote and VPIRG.

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