

SHINING A LIGHT ON THE FOX VALLEY SINCE 1846

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BILLBOARDS LEAVE



Major political operatives are linked to the signs, but they're not 'campaign ads' >> 2

Signs of the political times

Organization targets Foster on union vote

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What do you get when you cross George W. Bush's chief strategist, unregulated corporate cash and a congressional candidate's father?

You get DoNotLetBill-FosterKillJobs.com.

Billboards simply stating that Web site and the name Economic Freedom Alliance have been popping up around the Fox Valley.

While the Economic Freedom Alliance's local signs name freshman U.S. Rep. Bill Foster, D-Genève, as the potential job murderer, identical signs target Democrat Rep. Debbie Halvorson from Crete, Missouri Democrat Rep. Ike Skelton, Indiana Democrat Sen. Evan Bayh and Missouri Democrat Sen. Claire McCaskill.

Five signs, five Democrats. Four are up for reelection next year.

One of the consultants the EFA said helped strategize the campaign — Denny Hastert, former speaker of the House and the longtime congressman in the Fox Valley's 14th District — is the father of one of Foster's challengers.

But the signs aren't campaign signs, EFA leaders say. They're about the Employee Free Choice Act, a proposed change to union rules not mentioned anywhere on the billboards.



Bill Foster



Denny Hastert



Karl Rove

The signs can't be campaign signs, the EFA said. That would be illegal.

Why the signs?

"The concept is that somebody should see that billboard, go to the Internet and see what that's all about," said Economic Freedom Alliance President Ron Gidwitz, who ran for Illinois governor in 2006.

But people who don't look up the site where the Free Choice Act is discussed just see a sign with a politician's name and the idea of killing jobs.

"I'm sure lots of people will see the billboard and not go to the Internet. That happens to all sorts of advertising," Gidwitz said.

This type of tactic is common among "527 groups" like the EFA, said Dave Levinthal of the Center for Responsive Politics.

"They can criticize or promote a candidate's record but aren't specifically telling you to vote for Candidate X," he said.

The 527 groups file with the IRS as political organizations, not with the Federal Election Commission as political committees. Committees have rules limiting individual donations to \$5,000 a year and forbidding corporate or union money.

Since the EFA formed two years ago, it has taken

in \$146,000 in corporate donations, IRS records show.

And the EFA has taken in \$305,500 in individual donations, some as high as \$50,000. The average donation was just more than \$14,500.

Of the 21 individual donations the group reported to the IRS, nine would have been legal had the group registered as a political committee.

Why these five?

The Employee Free Choice Act, if Congress approves it, would make it easier to join or form unions. In general the unions are for it, factory owners against it.

Of the 225 co-sponsors of the House version of the bill, only Foster, Halvorson and Skelton were targeted. Bayh and McCaskill did not co-sponsor the Senate version of the bill.

Gidwitz said the five candidates were targeted in part because they aren't strong supporters.

"There's no sense in spending money on people whose minds you can't change," Gidwitz said, adding there are more possible targets in Ohio, Wisconsin and Missouri.

Who got paid?

"The Economic Freedom Alliance affords our members an opportunity to express their opinions about different issues, in this case the so-called Employee Free Choice

Opposing union rule changes

Economic Freedom Alliance expenditures:

- Former Bush strategist Karl Rove — \$100,000 as consultant
- Former House Speaker Denny Hastert — \$10,000 as consultant
- Fundraiser Lisa Wagner (also working for Ethan Hastert campaign) — \$53,113 as fundraiser
- South Side Chicago ministers James L. Demus III, Leslie Sanders and Roosevelt Watkins III — \$15,000 each as community organizers

Act," said Illinois Manufacturer Association President Greg Baise, who also acts as EFA treasurer and helped set up the group.

The Illinois Manufacturer Association is both the biggest EFA donor (\$390,000 in the first half of this year) and the biggest recipient of EFA money. More than \$393,000 went to Xpress Professional Services, a for-profit polling and advertising division of the IMA.

The next biggest recipient of EFA money is Karl Rove, former strategist for President George W. Bush. Rove received \$100,000 in consultant fees in the first half of this year.

The offices of Karl Rove and Co. did not respond to repeated requests for comment.

What did Denny do?

Foster's Republican opponent in 2010 could be

TURN TO **VOTE**, PAGE 9

VOTE

FROM PAGE 2

Ethan Hastert, son of Denny Hastert. Denny Hastert was paid \$10,000 in May as an EFA consultant.

His spokesman, Brad Hahn, said the elder Hastert was hired only as an

out-of-state fundraiser. Any strategy was just something that came up in conversation, he said.

"The actual work was for the fundraising, but he and Ron (Gidwitz) know each other and talked about that as well," Hahn said.

However, Baise said Hastert was specifically

asked to strategize.

"Denny Hastert was asked to help us formulate a strategy of the kind of opposition and language that could be used," Baise said.

Gidwitz said Hastert's involvement has been ongoing.

"Denny Hastert and Karl Rove have been in-

involved since we got started back in November, early December and have been advising us all the way," he said.

This surprised Ethan Hastert.

"I didn't know that," the younger Hastert said when told of his father's EFA involvement. "News to me."