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Bill to rein in Dominion donations to legislators meets expected demise

by MAURA MAZUROWSKI, Capital News Service Feb 3, 2017 Updated Feb 3, 2017



State Sen. Chap Petersen failed in an effort to prohibit Virginia legislators from taking donations from Dominion. (AP Photo/Steve Helber/v Capital News Service)

RICHMOND – Everybody at the state Capitol saw this coming: the death of a bill to prohibit Dominion, the single largest corporate donor in Virginia politics, from giving campaign contributions to legislators, the governor and other public officials.

Sen. Chap Petersen (D-Fairfax) filed the measure on Jan. 25 because, he said, state lawmakers shouldn't take money from public utilities that are regulated by the General Assembly and other state agencies.

"Monopolies like Dominion or Appalachian Power have an undue influence on the political process," Petersen said.

Because he introduced his bill after the filing deadline, Petersen needed the unanimous consent of the Senate to proceed. After two senators objected to the legislation, Petersen officially withdrew the proposal Jan. 31. He plans to reintroduce the bill next year, according to Alex Parker of the senator's staff.

The measure sought to forbid any candidate for the General Assembly or statewide office from accepting donations from "public-service corporations" – such as power and telephone companies regulated by the State Corporation Commission.

In a speech on the Senate floor, Petersen said those corporations use political donations to influence legislative decisions.

"I happen to believe that public policy should be decided on the merits and not based on donations," he said.

Attempts to alter Virginia's campaign-finance system, which allows unlimited donations from people and corporations as long as politicians publicly disclose the contributions, have been unsuccessful. The closest the state has come to ethics reform was in 2015 when the General Assembly passed legislation to put a \$100 limit on gifts and travel from lobbyists or those with business before the state.

Dominion has given more than \$1.3 million to Virginia political campaigns since 2015 and about \$14.4 million since the late 1990s, according to the nonpartisan Virginia Public Access Project.

According to VPAP data, the 12 members of the Senate Commerce and Labor Committee who voted to Petersen's first bill received a total of more than \$729,000 in donations from the company.

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The two committee members who voted against killing the bill also received contributions from Dominion, totaling about \$30,000.

Petersen himself has accepted \$22,519 in campaign donations from Dominion since 2001, according to VPAP.

“If Dominion makes a written demand – in writing – I’ll write a check and give back the money,” he said.

Dominion officials criticized Petersen’s proposal to ban the company from making political donations, saying it would violate free-speech rights. They also have criticized Petersen’s stand on other energy-related issues.

“Not only has Sen. Petersen introduced legislation to roll back advancements in solar energy and payment assistance for low-income families, but now he’s against the First Amendment,” said Dominion spokesman David Botkins.

“Our 16,200 employees – 9,000 of whom work in Virginia – are proud of the role we play in helping the commonwealth grow and improve,” Botkins said. “We believe our democracy works best when all participate, not when government chooses who can speak and who cannot.”

Petersen filed the measure after losing a fight over another bill to increase regulation of electric utilities in Virginia. That measure died Jan. 16 on a 12-2 vote in the Senate Commerce and Labor Committee.

That bill’s defeat prompted Petersen to file his measure to prohibit legislators from taking campaign donations from regulated monopolies.

“Now I know, and in one of those ‘gambling at Rick’s’ moments, I decided, or some people mentioned to me, that maybe donations made within this body, or any body, does have some impact on public policy,” Petersen told his colleagues.

“I thought it was worth putting forward legislation that would limit, if not prohibit, donations made by public service corporations, which are the very same monopolies that were subject to the jurisdiction of the State Corporation Commission in setting their prices, that would limit and prohibit those donations.”