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Taxpayers group to add clout with PAC

It plans to give money to candidates, officials

By [Bob Bernick Jr.](#)

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The state's largest anti-tax advocacy group, the Utah Taxpayers Association, plans to start what its founders say will become one of the wealthiest political action committees in Utah — giving money, in addition to advice, to state candidates and officeholders.

While considering for several years whether to form a PAC, the association's board finally announced it will jump into the political-giving contest just before the 2006 midterm legislative races, the group's vice president, Mike Jerman, said Monday.

"It all kind of came together — the (public funding) for the soccer stadium, the transit bond — every kind (of tax hike or public) giveaway" that disgusted the taxpayer association bosses enough to start up a PAC, Jerman said.

Several yet-to-be-named supporters have pledged up to \$40,000 as matching cash, Jerman said. If matches are found, that original \$80,000 political pot would immediately put the taxpayers PAC in the upper realms of state political action committees. Donors' names will be listed in the Sept. 15 PAC filing, but Jerman declined to name them now.

"We are in this for the long haul. We aim to be in the top 10" of political giving to legislative and local government candidates within a few years, Jerman said.

The Utah Taxpayers Association, a nonprofit research group started in 1923, is funded mostly by Utah businesses, along with a few individual members. The organization has become more and more political over the years, and its longtime president, Howard Stephenson, has been a Republican state senator from Draper for more than a decade. But until now, it has not formed a PAC and has not given cash donations to candidates.

Stephenson often gets into tussles with organizations that push for more spending in various state programs. The Utah Education Association — the state's largest teachers union — has been a particular bugaboo for Stephenson and other taxpayer association personnel. And the UEA's PAC has been one of the state's largest for years.

UEA executive director Susan Kuziak said she's read the taxpayers' PAC announcement, and she believes the new PAC's leanings are much like the political agenda of Sen. Stephenson.

"It makes me wonder if the businesses that support the taxpayers association, and so probably will support its PAC financially, hold the same views as their spokesman (Stephenson)," said Kuziak. "Do (the business owners) really advocate for private school vouchers, for tax credits? Do they really want private industry taking over our education system? I suppose (the PAC's) motivation and results will be told over time."

The taxpayers group has named its political fund-raising arm TAXPAC. In its announcement press release, Jerman writes: "Are you tired of state and local elected officials claiming to be fiscally conservative at election time, while the rest of the time the last thing on their minds is the taxpayer? So are we!"

For fiscal year 2006-07, the Legislature, dominated 3-1 by Republicans, voted for a 17.6 percent increase over last year's spending in the state's two main funds: the Uniform School Fund and the General Fund.

It was record spending. And Stephenson voted in favor of every spending bill during the 2006 Legislature. He also voted for the major tax-cutting bills, also passed this year.

Jerman said, "The legislators themselves, much less the public, didn't know how much spending was happening during the session. We found out five minutes after the session ended (at midnight March 1) that spending was up by 17 percent."

The main budget bill passed the final night of the Legislature.

"It was just another example of how the whole appropriations process needs to be reformed," Jerman said.

Still, saying no to spending on programs when money is available can be tough.

Stephenson also voted in favor of USTAR, a new research and business development effort started at the University of Utah and Utah State University. USTAR is one of the largest ever new state programs. It is costing \$50 million this year, with another \$110 million general obligation bond to be paid off by taxpayers over six years.

With bond interest included, it's \$173 million in new spending. USTAR was one of GOP Gov. Jon Huntsman Jr.'s main economic-development proposals in the 2006 Legislature, backed by most lawmakers.

E-mail: bbjr@desnews.com

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