

Democracy North Carolina

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22 State Legislators Receive Sunshine Award; Speaker's Committee Shows Value of Review

As Friday's deadline approaches for filing the first campaign disclosure reports of the 2012 election cycle, 22 state legislators are receiving a pleasant surprise – a "Sunshine Award" from the often critical watchdog group Democracy North Carolina.

The biennial award is given to lawmakers who turn in "superior" reports revealing important details about who gave them campaign donations and how they spent the money.

Award winners include a bipartisan group of 15 House members and 7 state Senators. The list has 9 Democrats led by former House Speaker Joe Hackney and 13 Republicans led by Senate Rules Chair Tom Apodaca. Winners represent all parts of the state and include newcomers Jeff Collins and Rick Gunn and veterans Austin Allran and Debbie Clary. *See next page for the list.*

"At a time of intense partisan wrangling, it's great to see so many legislators across ideological and party lines who respect the public's right to know how money flows during elections," said Bob Hall, executive director of the nonpartisan organization. "These lawmakers are role models for their colleagues in recognizing that campaigns and elections are public activities, not private affairs."

Democracy NC evaluated the campaign reports filed by all 170 legislators elected in 2010 to determine who did the best job of disclosing where they got their campaign money and how they used it. The winners received from 15 to 1,700 contributions above \$50 from individual donors.

Winners of the Sunshine Award: (1) filed their six reports in 2009-2010 on time and in an accessible format; (2) identified the purpose of 99% of their expense items over \$50; (3) listed the full address and occupational information for 99% of the many individuals who gave them over \$50; (4) filed 48-hour reports for large donations received shortly before the November election; and (5) submitted electronic reports if they received a total of more than \$100,000.

"The level of detail in the reports has steadily improved in the last few years, thanks in large part to the training program now required for campaign treasurers," said Hall. "But too many candidates, including those raising over \$200,000, are still submitting their reports on paper rather than electronically and that makes meaningful access and accountability much more difficult."

"Strong disclosure laws protect the public interest and help educate voters," he noted. The reports reveal, for example, whether a legislator gets support from a broad range of interests or is more narrowly backed by attorneys or auto dealers, doctors or commercial lenders.

Of the top four leaders in the General Assembly, only House Minority Leader Joe Hackney received an award. Senate President Pro Tem Phil Berger and Senate Minority Leader Martin Nesbitt provided useful details about their donors but did not file their large reports electronically to facilitate public access.

Like Hackney, House Speaker Thom Tillis used electronic filing, but his reports lacked any occupational information for hundreds of his donors. When alerted about this problem in January,

Tillis' treasurer said he had collected the information but didn't realize it was meant for the public report. He then promptly filed amended reports going back to Tillis' first campaign in 2006.

“This problem could have been corrected much earlier if the State Board of Elections had the resources to conduct the basic desk audit of reports that state law requires,” said Hall. “The Tillis reports went unexamined for years. Thousands of other reports for other candidates and political committees have not been reviewed.”

According to a Democracy NC analysis, the information on 651 of the 1,492 (44%) disclosure reports filed by legislative candidates in 2010 had not even been entered into the Board of Elections electronic database as of mid-May 2011. That's the first step necessary for conducting a desk audit.

“We need to require campaigns to file reports electronically, using formats that facilitate public access and staff review,” said Hall. “We're stuck back in the paper age – it's embarrassing for a state that prides itself on good government and open records. We've made real progress in North Carolina, but we have plenty of room for improvement.”

Sunshine Award Winners - 2011

District	Party	LEGISLATOR	Counties Represented
SEN - 42	REP	Austin Allran	Catawba, Iredell
SEN - 48	REP	Tom Apodaca	Buncombe, Henderson, Polk
SEN - 34	REP	Andrew C. Brock	Davie, Rowan
HOU - 102	DEM	Becky Carney	Mecklenburg
SEN - 46	REP	Debbie Ann Clary	Cleveland, Rutherford
HOU - 25	REP	Jeffrey L. Collins	Nash
HOU - 100	DEM	Tricia Cotham	Mecklenburg
HOU - 43	DEM	Elmer Floyd	Cumberland
HOU - 85	REP	Mitch Gillespie	Burke, McDowell
HOU - 113	REP	W. David Guice	Henderson, Polk, Transylvania
SEN - 24	REP	Rick Gunn	Alamance, Caswell
HOU - 54	DEM	Joe Hackney	Chatham, Moore, Orange
HOU - 17	REP	Frank Iler	Brunswick
HOU - 64	REP	Dan W. Ingle	Alamance
SEN - 3	DEM	Clark Jenkins	Edgecombe, Martin, Pitt
HOU - 34	DEM	Grier Martin	Wake
HOU - 13	REP	Patricia McElraft	Carteret, Jones
HOU - 48	DEM	Garland E. Pierce	Hoke, Robeson, Scotland
SEN - 2	REP	Jean R. Preston	Carteret, Craven, Pamlico
HOU - 94	REP	Shirley Randleman	Wilkes
HOU - 38	DEM	Deborah K. Ross	Wake
HOU - 35	DEM	Jennifer Weiss	Wake