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The Capitol Report

**Republicans tout fundraising edge as midterm elections near**

There’s a big governor’s race, and a nationally important U.S. Senate race this fall.

But insiders are also watching the race for the state Senate, where two Democratic special election victories this year have cut the GOP margin to 18-15.

GOP Senate Majority Leader Scott Fitzgerald is touting the Republicans’ fundraising edge in key races as well as over the Democrats' legislative committee, saying it vindicates his decision not to spend more money in northeastern Wisconsin’s 1st Senate District in an attempt to hold the seat.

After Caleb Frostman, D-Sturgeon Bay, beat Andre Jacque, R-De Pere, in the June 12 special election, Fitzgerald faced criticism for the Committee to Elect a Republican Senate's financial commitment to the race. At the time, he said he didn't go all in to help preserve resources for the fall, when the seat will again be up.

Fitzgerald, R-Juneau, now points to the most recent reports, which show CERS had more than $1.3 million in the bank between its two campaign finance accounts. By comparison, the State Senate Democratic Committee had $327,970 in its two accounts.

Fitzgerald tells WisPolitics.com that edge will help Republicans protect their majority and go on offense in several seats.

"I believe we're absolutely coming back with the majority," Fitzgerald declared. "It's just a question of how many seats."

Senate Minority Leader Jennifer Shilling, D-La Crosse, downplayed the GOP's financial advantage after the most recent fundraising period, saying Republicans can't buy enthusiasm or the trust of voters.

Shilling said Frostman's win in last month's special election has given her ammunition to reach out to donors to make sure "Wisconsin is back on the map" nationally as a place to invest. The Democratic Legislative Campaign Committee has listed 17 seats that it will target in an effort to flip eight legislative chambers across the country. That list includes Wisconsin's 17th Senate District in southwestern Wisconsin, held by Republican Howard Marklein, and 19th Senate District near Appleton, held by Republican Roger Roth.

Shilling, who noted Frostman's win in the 1st was two weeks before the close of the most recent reporting period, said she's warned all of her candidates that they will be outspent this fall.

"Money might talk, but it doesn't vote," Shilling said. "We are on the offense this year. Republicans have to be on the defensive."

Fitzgerald transferred $100,000 from his personal campaign account to CERS during the six-month fundraising period. The group also received a $100,000 donation from John Schaffer, described as a manager from Chicago in the CERS report, and $18,000 from the campaign account of GOP Sen. Duey Stroebel, appointed by Fitzgerald to the Joint Finance Committee this session. Stroebel filled the vacancy left by Sheila Harsdorf after she was appointed DATCP secretary.

Together, those three contributions accounted for more than 40 percent of what CERS raised through its main campaign account.

By comparison, the SSDC's biggest donation to its main account was $12,000 from the Wisconsin Laborers District Council.

Fitzgerald used the CERS main account to give $30,000 each to GOP Rep. Kathy Bernier, who got into the race to replace Republican Sen. Terry Moulton after he announced in mid-March he would not seek re-election, and James Bolen, who is challenging Sen. Janet Bewley, D-Ashland.

CERS also made $5,176 in-kind donations to Bernier, who raised $116,306 during the first six months of the year. Of that, $57,176 was from committees. Over the last half of 2017, Bernier listed just $515 in receipts.

Bernier's Dem rival Chris Kapsner, an emergency room physician, raised $37,985 during the period, including $11,315 from committees.

In the 25th, Bewley raised $51,809 during the period, more than half of that from committees, and finished the period with $64,415 in the bank. Bolen raised $63,734, including $37,797 from committees, and had $54,345 cash on hand.

Other top Senate races will be in the: 1st, where Frostman has to run again to hold the seat; the Milwaukee-area’s 5th, where GOP state Rep. Dale Kooyenga of Brookfield is trying to keep the seat being vacated by GOP U.S. Senate candidate Leah Vukmir; central Wisconsin’s 29th, where Sen. Jerry Petrowski, R-Marathon, is the incumbent; and the 31st, the western Wisconsin seat being given up by Dem gubernatorial candidate Kathleen Vinehout.

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