
By Carl Golden

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Despite mounting criticism of the decision by New Direction New Jersey to refuse to disclose its financial supporters, its officers seem determined to tough it out and shrug off the unfavorable media coverage, seemingly confident the issue will fade as other high-profile concerns capture public attention.

The nonprofit political action committee is governed by close allies and confidants of Gov. Phil Murphy, and despite the pledge made by his campaign manager, Brendan Gill, when the group was created in November

The episode has given Sweeney another opportunity to raise questions about the Murphy administration. He was quick to point out that, despite the noninvolvement strictures placed on him, the governor could easily issue a public call for the PAC to meet transparency obligations and release a list of its supporters. It was Murphy, after all, who expressed his expectation that disclosure would be made.

The group's spokesman emphasized its compliance with all state and federal laws, and that it was within its legal right to maintain the donor anonymity.

While there is some debate over whether the letter of the law is being adhered to, the PAC position appears to be solid—it is not obliged to disclose its supporters and does not intend to do so.

Its need to protect against a “toxic political environment” rationale may be thin, but it is for the moment sufficient and will hold until ambiguities in the law are resolved and definitive guidelines written.

The decision to tough it out is based on a belief that the political harm in doing so will be minimal compared with the potential uproar that could ensue if the donors are outed.

The global issue of campaign finance, fundraising techniques, expenditures and the like is, in the minds of many, so complex and convoluted that voters quickly tire of it, leaving it to elected officials and the courts to address.

The whiff of hypocrisy created by the New Direction New Jersey PAC will dissipate over time. History suggests that similar issues and controversies have a limited shelf life.

For a governor, though, facing a difficult year after coming off a less than outstanding one, it's a distraction he could have done without. Undermining his credibility and oft-stated commitment to transparency in government certainly hasn't helped.