

Negative Campaign Mailers Must Be Confronted

By Elissa Giambastiani

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The League of Women Voters of Marin County believes that elections should be fair and transparent.

Unfortunately, during the past few years the climate of local elections in Marin has changed. It's not unusual for candidates to be the victims of malicious attacks and last minute "hit" pieces. As a result, many fair-minded citizens who might want to run for local office are deterred by the thought of becoming a victim of personal and misleading attacks.

Because of this increased "uncivil" campaigning and its negative effect on potential local candidates, the Marin League decided to take action. Early this year the board created a Campaign Reform Committee that looked carefully at six local races in which Independent Expenditure Committees (IECs) played a major role in funding various "hit" pieces.

IECs can raise and spend unlimited funds in support of or against a candidate. They have only one rule. They can't coordinate their activities with the candidate. Many voters probably remember the negative television ads that ran during the last presidential campaign. Those ads were conceived and funded by IECs.

IECs, however, are not just a factor in national elections. They also have impacted campaigns for offices in the Marin Healthcare District, the Marin Municipal Water District, the Sausalito and San Rafael City Council races, the state Assembly race, and now the state Senate race. We found ample evidence of smear tactics used by IECs in our review.

Our Campaign Reform Committee developed a list of suggestions on campaign reform that has been submitted to the Board of Supervisors. We have urged them to take the lead on this issue and adopt an ordinance that would put additional controls on future IECs and make them more transparent. We hope that the Supervisors will create a "model" ordinance that can be adopted by all Marin cities.

The League's Campaign Reform Committee wants voters to realize that every campaign piece that arrives in their mailbox is not necessarily true. We plan to develop materials to help voters analyze campaign mailers to determine if the statements made against a candidate are valid and relevant.

It is our hope that Marin's community leaders, elected officials and candidates will decide they no longer want this kind of negative campaigning, We want them to create a new climate of civility in local elections by repudiating the tactics of IECs. We want voters to stand up and demand an end to negative campaigning and a return to civil discourse. We hope you will join us.

Elissa Giambastiani is the Chair of the Campaign Reform Committee of the League of Women Voters of Marin County