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Opponents Joust Over Campaign Financing

By Philip J. LaVelle

Wrapping themselves in the mantle of campaign-finance reform, San Diego mayoral candidates Jerry Sanders and Donna Frye accused each other last night of benefiting from special-interest money and embraced divergent methods of cleaning up political spending.

It was a timely subject, coming at a debate one day after the candidates filed campaign-finance reports at City Hall. Those reports showed that Sanders has taken in 2 1/2 times as much money as Frye in the past 10 weeks.

Sanders, a former San Diego police chief, said he is uncomfortable asking people for money and accused Frye of failing to get back to him on a suggestion, made earlier in the campaign, that she put a stop to independent expenditures.

"I'm still waiting to hear about that," Sanders said during a debate at the University of California San Diego's Price Center Theatre.

"Mr. Sanders needs to read the campaign laws," Frye shot back, noting that candidates are prohibited by law from coordinating with interest groups that launch independent expenditure campaigns.

"I have read the special expenditure law, council member Frye, and I also know the reality that if you know somebody's going to put special-interest money in because they've done it in the primary, you certainly need to talk to them so they don't do it in the general election," Sanders said.

He added that he would favor banning independent expenditures in San Diego city campaigns.

Frye drew laughter with her response: "I sure hope Jerry will talk to the people that are sending out the hit pieces against me with the independent expenditures and tell them to knock it off. Jerry, Jerry, Jerry -- what can I say?"

The Frye campaign said an anti-Frye mailer, paid for by the San Diego County Republican Party, came out last week.

Last night's debate highlighted the fundamental differences in financial support for both candidates. The event, sponsored by California Common Cause and the League of Women Voters of San Diego, was advertised as focusing on government reform and accountability. Organizers said about 350 people attended.

The event was the candidates' first meeting in the fall campaign before a live audience. In the weeks leading up to the Nov. 8 election, the debate will be aired 14 times on UCSD-TV. A schedule can be found at www.ucsd.tv.

Questions came from six panelists, including Alberto Zevallos of the San Diego Alliance for Clean Elections, who asked about campaign finance. His organization advocates public funding of political campaigns for candidates who eschew private financing.

"I'd like to see full funding (of campaigns) by the taxpayers, but simply put, right now in San Diego we don't have the money," Sanders said, referring to a fiscal crisis driven by a pension-system deficit of at least \$1.4 billion.

Spending tax dollars on political campaigns would come at the expense of basic city services, such as pothole repair and the "6- to-6" before- and after-school program, Sanders said.

Frye said she "absolutely" supports public funding of political campaigns.

"It frees up my time," she said. "I like the idea of being freed up from the dialing for dollars. I would rather raise money for different causes that were important to me."

She also suggested that politicians would be more independent if they did not receive the \$300-maximum donations per election allowed under city law.

Sanders also lamented the process of raising money, but said the city's current fundraising limit is appropriate.

In campaign-finance reports filed Thursday, Frye reported taking in nearly \$168,000 in campaign contributions in the past 10 weeks, bringing her total contributions to \$346,957.

Sanders reported raising more than \$421,000 during the same period, bringing his total contributions to nearly \$720,000. Although he has the fundraising edge, Sanders said he is bracing for heavy independent expenditures, paid by labor unions, on Frye's behalf.