

# Real estate agent, developer donate big to Moreno Valley campaign group

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MORENO VALLEY - A real estate agent and the development company behind the Aquabella and Skechers projects have combined to contribute \$164,500 to a campaign committee seeking to oust incumbent city Councilmen Charles White and Frank West in the Nov. 4 election.

Jerry Stephens, owner of Diversified Real Estate, has contributed \$104,500 to the Moreno Valley Taxpayers Association campaign committee during the first half of 2008, according to the committee's semiannual report filed last week.

In addition, Highland Fairview Properties donated \$60,000 to the committee. Highland Fairview is developing the Aquabella residential community near Riverside County Regional Medical Center and the Skechers distribution center project along Highway 60.

## Money Raised, Spent

In total, the Moreno Valley Taxpayers Association reported raising \$175,854 during the first half of 2008. The committee has spent more than \$45,500 on print ads, including \$10,374 for ads on behalf of a related committee, Moreno Valley Citizens for Rancho Belago.

The taxpayers association has sent out a series of mailers to local voters accusing White and West of failing to protect Moreno Valley from crime and increasing traffic congestion.

The mailers included pictures of a man with his head buried in the sand, referring to the incumbent councilmen, and a man, ostensibly a criminal, wearing a ski mask.

Stephens said he donated so much money because he believes it's time for new blood on the council, especially in light of the crime and traffic and the city's need for jobs.

"The reputation of the city is getting so bad it's hard to sell real estate," Stephens said by phone. "It's hard to get people to invest in this town."

Highland Fairview President Iddo Benzeevi said he was not involved with the Moreno Valley Taxpayers Association. Benzeevi said the association's treasurer, Michael Geller, had asked him if he would support a "community organization that would raise issues of concern."

"At the time, I thought that it would be a good idea to support more public ... discussion about issues that concern all of us, such as the rising crime rate in town (and) the traffic that seems to be continuously increasing," Benzeevi said during an interview last month in his office.

The developer said his company has supported a number of local activities and organizations, including the Fourth of July celebration and the city's 21st birthday celebration.

Although he is concerned about traffic and crime, like Stephens, Benzeevi said the mailers "certainly wouldn't have been my style or the wording I would use."

West, who has represented eastern Moreno Valley since 1996, said the amount of money that the Moreno Valley Taxpayers Association is spending in the council races is unprecedented in city history.

He accused Stephens and Benzeevi of bearing grudges because the councilman wouldn't support their projects to build distribution centers, small-lot homes and apartments in eastern Moreno Valley. West said his constituents oppose those projects.

"Rather than provide reasons why their plan is a good plan, they use hit pieces to discredit me personally," West said by phone. "They never talk about the (land-use) issues."

The councilman said he is prepared to debate Benzeevi and Stephens on the land-use issues anywhere.

White, who has represented central Moreno Valley since 1996, also questioned Benzeevi's and Stephens' motives.

"I'd like to know who are they going to put on the council and why they want us off the council," he said by phone. "(Is it) because we're not kowtowing to them? There are a lot of questions 'why.' "

Stephens called such speculation "ridiculous," noting that West has generally supported his and other developers' projects.

"I've never had a problem with his votes," the real estate agent said.

One project that West raised concerns about, which would have called for a zoning change and more homes allowed near Alessandro Boulevard and Merwin Street, is on hold and is probably not economically feasible now, he said.

## **Nov. 4 Election, Money**

In addition to West and White, Mayor Bill Batey is also facing re-election on Nov. 4. Batey has represented western Moreno Valley since 1996.

West had the most money raised for his campaign with \$9,473 in the bank, according to his committee's report. Batey had \$6,792 in funding, while White, who typically finances his own campaigns, had no money raised, according to their respective reports.

The deadline for council candidates to file to run in the election is Friday. Stephens, who is on the taxpayers association's board, said the committee could endorse candidates by then.

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