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Phone (207) 774-1936
Email: info@truedialog.org

P.O. Box 171
Portland, Maine 04112

LIES, DAMN LIES & MHPC

By Carl Lindemann
Founder, TrueDialog.org

Maine Heritage Policy Center (MHPC) has risen up by talking down Maine's economy, tax structure and healthcare insurance reform. But how reliable are the facts and figures they produce to pump their pessimism?

Looking at the problematic "facts" that MHPC has put forward to the Ethics Commission is telling. In the ongoing investigations into its finances and activities, testimony made by MHPC's Executive Director Bill Becker and its attorney Dan Billings has been exposed as untrue. Though the Commission has yet to determine whether they engaged in deliberate deception, the chasm separating MHPC's "facts" from reality raises doubts about all its claims. If MHPC is inaccurate or dishonest in an Ethics Commission investigation, how trustworthy is it when promoting ideology-driven political propaganda to the public and to the legislature?

Concerns over MHPC's honesty surfaced after Billings testified to the Commission on the eve of the vote for the ballot initiative. He was unequivocal on this point-of-fact: "...MHPC has not specifically solicited or accepted any contributions to support the Taxpayer Bill of Rights."

But evidence proving otherwise surfaced including "thank you" notes to a TABOR donor that Becker signed personally. A form letter stating that the funds would be used to "advance (MHPC's) mission of promoting the taxpayer Bill of Rights in Maine" was especially damning. Billings explained this as innocent because "...influencing the outcome of a referendum to me has—has meaning that may not have the same meaning to you."

Becker shares this difficulty with definitions. By his account, his organization educates and does not advocate. Responding to questions by commissioners, he was also unequivocal. "We do not take any 'pro' or 'con' stance on any issue," he testified.

When Ethics Commission Executive Director Jonathan Wayne wondered about this, Becker drew a sharp contrast between MHPC and Citizens United, the anti-

TABOR political action committee. Becker was presented as equal and opposite arguing in favor of TABOR against that organization's representative in public debates. But Becker claimed a fundamental difference.

"My organization does policy research. Their organization is doing political advocacy. There is a difference between policy and politics," Becker stated.

Even the Ethics Commission's most conservative Republican member, Vinton Cassidy of Calais, did not find Becker's claims credible. By a unanimous vote in December, MHPC was ordered to disclose its funding and expenditures promoting TABOR by mid-January.

How well did Becker do in accounting for his organization's advocacy? He had testified that the campaign provided a golden opportunity for fundraising and also boasted to the press that donations were expected to show a six-figure increase over the previous year. Yet somehow, Becker reports receiving only \$975 for TABOR. In other words, MHPC's marquee campaign in a banner year accounted for less than one dollar in \$125 of the increase. Perhaps to explain these miserable results, he reports zero fundraising expenditures. If accurate, this is a confession of gross incompetence. Becker let this opportunity for fundraising pass without lifting a finger or a phone. Meanwhile, MHPC contract employee Roy Lenardson raised a fortune at the pro-TABOR PAC. Becker didn't ask for a single contact from that bonanza?

During last month's Ethics Commission meeting, MHPC requested that the investigation into whether this report was "true, correct and complete" be put on hold. At the session, Commission Chair Jean Ginn Marvin stepped down to avoid what she described as an "apparent conflict of interest". But she remained for the proceeding. Why? She is MHPC's treasurer and was named in the complaint. In a split decision, her fellow commissioners agreed with MHPC and against the staff's recommendation to proceed.

So, for now, the public is denied any certainty about who bankrolled a ballot issue that reverberates through this legislative session. Still, some things are clear. Bill Becker has not been a reliable witness to the Ethics Commission, and now faces new charges that again raise substantive questions about his honesty and accuracy. So as MHPC continues to generate grim political propaganda to lobby the legislature, there should be substantive doubts about the source of this information and its reliability.

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