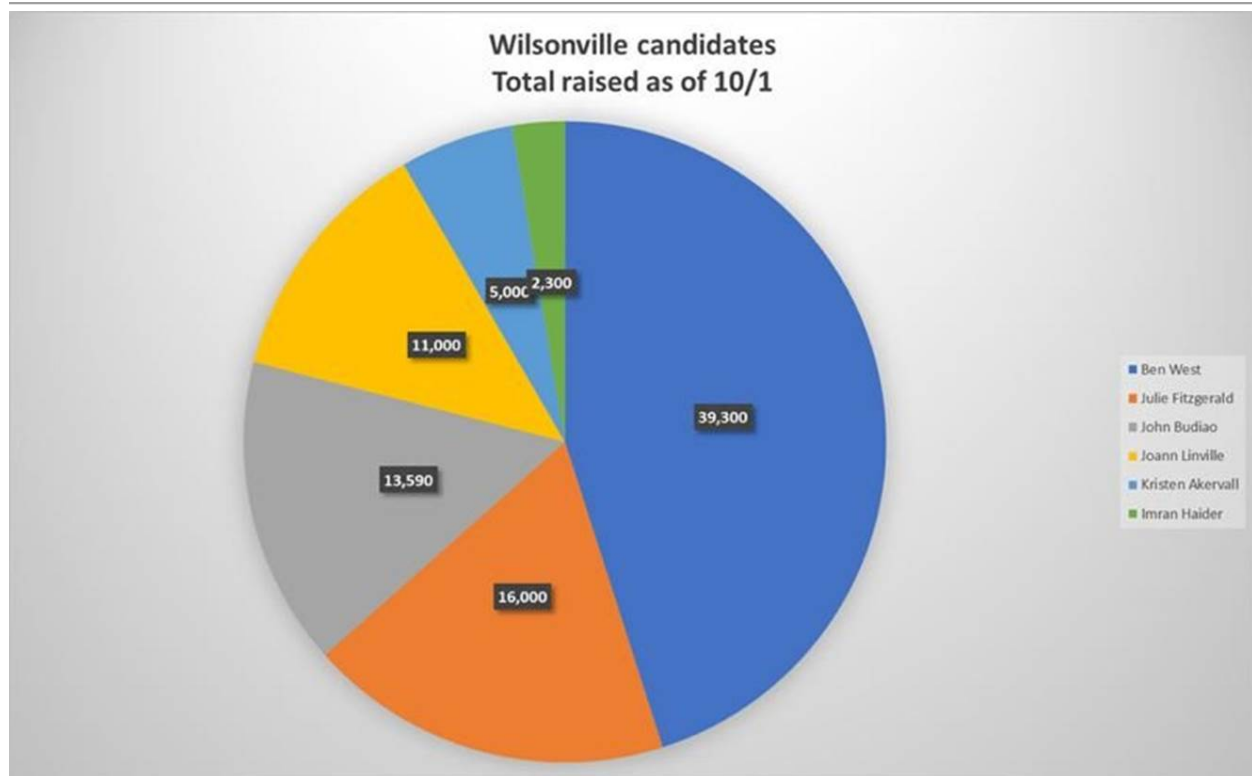


Aurora Airport leaders pour money into Wilsonville election

Wilsonville Spokesman

By Corey Buchanan, October 05 2020

Mayoral candidate Ben West's campaign contributions dwarf that of opponent Julie Fitzgerald



PMG PHOTO - Here's a breakdown of how much money each candidate for Wilsonville City Council had raised as of Oct. 1.

Aurora State Airport business leaders view the upcoming election as an opportunity to forge an entirely different relationship with the Wilsonville City Council.

Led by current and former mayors Tim Knapp and Charlotte Lehan, the council has consistently questioned planning at the airport just outside city limits. The Council has tried to stymie projects and even pursued litigation. Now, with the potential election of Ben West for mayor and John Budiao and Imran Haider for two open positions on the council, a new council friendlier to airport interests is a distinct possibility.

Leaders like TLM Holdings owner Ted Millar and Aurora Aviation President Bruce Bennett are flooding the race with significantly more money than previous election cycles, and have helped foster a lopsided mayoral race when it comes to campaign resources.

"The city management in Wilsonville has not had a good relationship with the airport for a long time; for decades. Here's an opportunity for some business savvy positive people to realize the huge benefits of the airport," Bennett said.

According to the state elections data, West has garnered \$39,300 in campaign contributions compared to about \$16,000 for his opponent Julie Fitzgerald. Meanwhile Budiao's campaign funding has exceeded fellow council contenders and, like West, has been buoyed by large donations deriving from airport interests.

By comparison, West accumulated less than \$10,000 for his City Council run two years ago, and the Spokesman reported just before the 2018 election that no candidate in the race had accumulated more than \$11,000. In 2012, Knapp collected only \$15,784 for his mayoral bid in 2012.

LUBA fight ongoing

The Wilsonville government is currently embroiled in a Land Use Board of Appeals case contesting an Oregon Aviation Board decision that effectively finalized the most recent Aurora Airport Master Plan, which includes a runway extension project that Wilsonville leaders fear could lead to airport expansion. The council majority says the master plan was never actually approved and that public process laws were violated.

Airport leaders testified in front of city council but "were unable to convince the City Council on multiple occasions over the last two years that their involvement was erroneous and mistaken," said Ben Williams president of Friends of French Prairie, which is also involved with the LUBA appeal. "In the absence of being able to persuade them, the move is to replace them."

Airport leaders, however, say the extension of the airport is necessary in order to improve safety and create jobs.

"I hope you can understand how incredibly frustrating it is when people are fighting a safety improvement," Bennett said.

In previous elections, airport leaders like Millar donated directly to candidates. And while Millar donated \$1,500 to West's campaign this year, most of the money is organized through the Jobs Political Action Committee.

This Jobs PAC, which has been around since 2013, didn't focus on Wilsonville issues until this year, when it donated \$12,500 to West's PAC, Ben West for Oregon, as well as \$5,000 to Budiao's PAC Friends of John Budiao and \$2,000 to Haider's PAC Vote Imran Haider. Rather than donating directly to candidates, several airport affiliates have contributed to the Jobs PAC. TLM Holdings contributed \$12,000, while Aurora Aircraft LLC (run by Bennett) added \$3,500 and MB Holdings Company (owned by Chris and Tom Maletis, who also own Langdon Farms Golf Course and have lobbied for urban development south of the Willamette River) chipped in \$5,500. Also, state Sen. Betsy Johnson, who was the former manager of the aeronautics division for the Oregon Department of Transportation (before the Oregon Department of Aviation was formed), donated \$1,000 to West's campaign.

The treasurer of the Jobs PAC, James Wilson, is a principal of the Public Affairs Counsel and one of his clients is the Aurora Airport Improvement Association, which recently started a

Friends of the Aurora Airport initiative designed to highlight the positive contributions of airport businesses. Wilson was also involved with a failed attempt to get the runway extension funded through a Federal Aviation Administration grant program.

"We want positive change in Wilsonville. That hasn't been a top-of-mind objective until now," Wilson said. "Part of what drives that is everything we want to do seems to be litigated by the city. And everything positive by the airport seems to be negatively cast by the city. There's a point in time, you have a positive story to tell, the contributions are evident. When leadership casts you in a negative light, you get sick of it."

Wilson said the candidates who received contributions have toured the airport, while Bennett said the candidates were interviewed. The candidates and airport leaders also convened recently for a fundraiser at Tumwater Vineyard in West Linn.

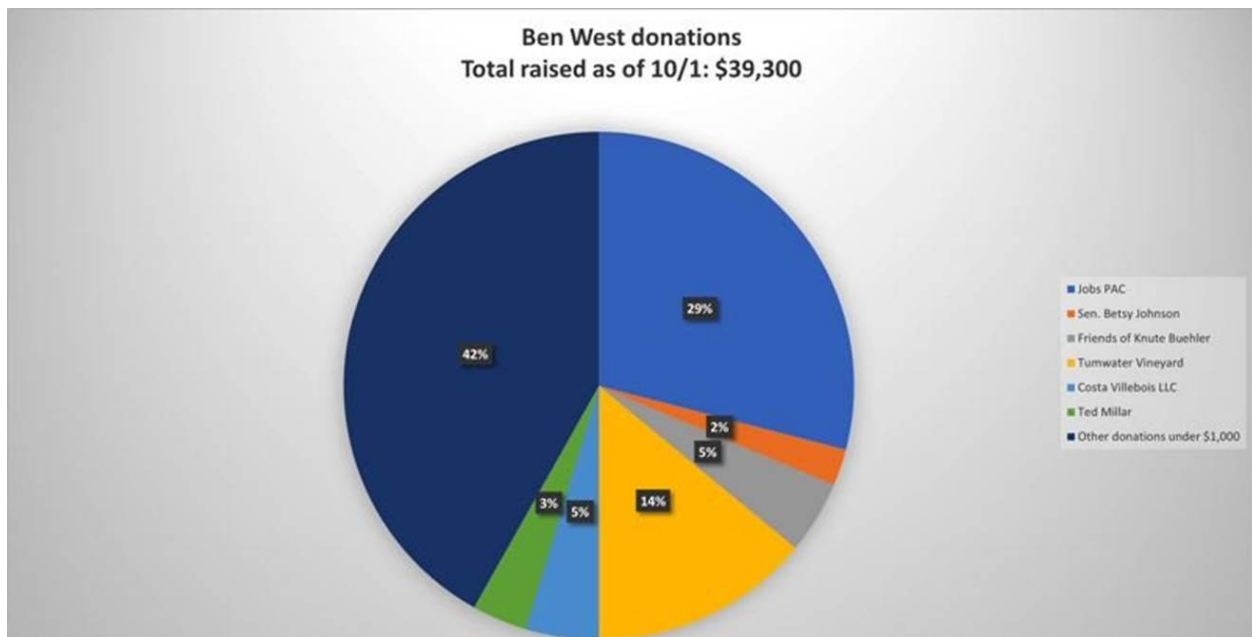
According to Wilson, airport leaders had been a "dormant group" that "let the naysayers run over them" until becoming more active recently.

He also said the Jobs PAC has allowed donors to spend their money in a more organized fashion. Meanwhile, Williams with Friends of French Prairie believes the PAC strategy "is an attempt to conceal donors and interests. It, is not just about electing fresh faces to the Wilsonville City Council," according to a post on the group's website.

Millar, the largest contributor, said he used to live in and operate his business out of Wilsonville until moving to Aurora and his business to the airport.

"Everybody has a right to support candidates that believe in things they believe in and we believe in business promotion because it's good for the community," he said.

West, Budiao, Haider prefer less adversarial relationship with airport



PMG PHOTO - Wilsonville mayoral candidate Ben West has raised much of his money from Aurora Airport interests, most significantly a Jobs Political Action Committee that received large contributions from airport leaders.

On the other hand, Wilsonville City Council candidate Joann Linville said airport leaders infusing cash campaign coffers was concerning.

"I wonder what the motive is," she said. "Why would an airport or entities doing business at the airport in Marion County want to influence a Wilsonville election? I can assume a number of things. That's what concerns me. What is the motivation there?"

Millar, Bennett and Wilson said donations were not made with the stipulation that candidates must carry out a particular policy. But it's clear, based on answers they've provided to the Spokesman, that West, Budiao and Haider would pursue a less adversarial approach toward the airport than the current council.

West questioned the city's tact toward the airport even before he was elected to council in 2018 and his position has held steady on the council, sometimes serving as the lone dissenting vote on airport-related decisions.

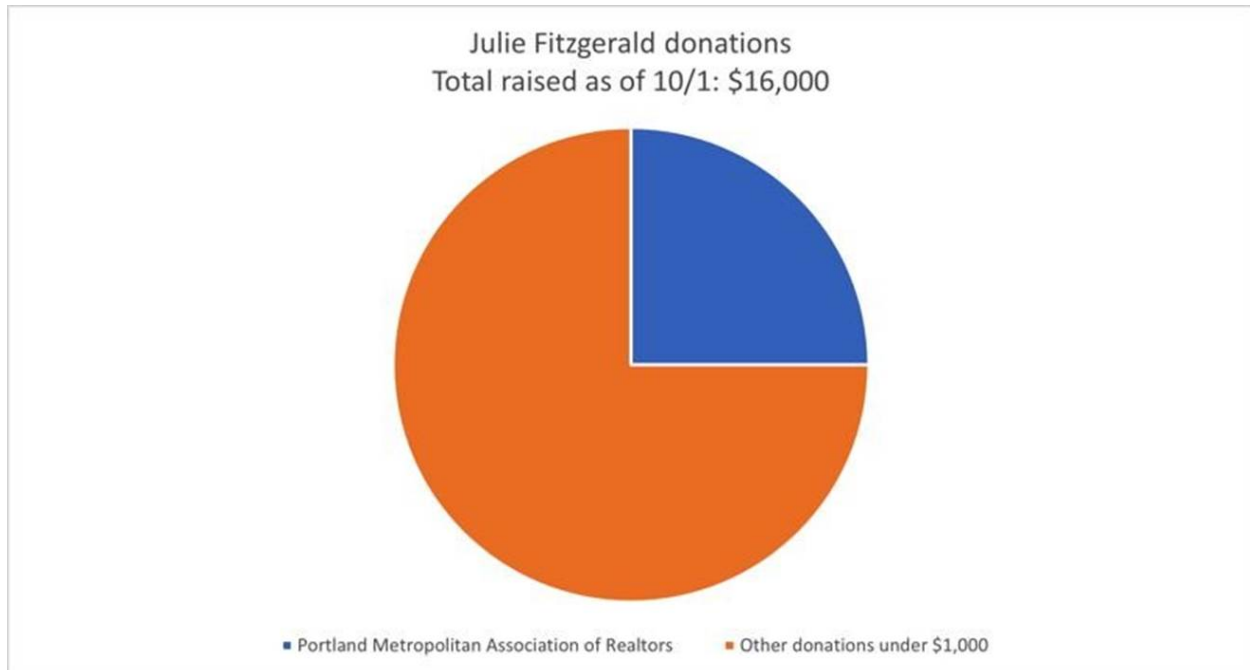
"I think making sure we're building relationships and having a tone of collaboration and not obstruction (with the airport) makes my candidacy more appealing than other candidates," West said.

West also said that he got to know Johnson through his efforts to reform the foster care system in Oregon. He also received \$2,000 from Friends of Knute Buehler. The former gubernatorial candidate, he said, is a close friend.

West has spent more than \$22,000 so far, which he said mostly went to purchasing mailers, signage and door hangers. Despite having a large lead in campaign contributions, he said the money he has raised doesn't guarantee him anything.

"We're going to do everything we can to saturate the message and have quality marketing and let people know who I am," West said. "If the voters are smart, if they choose me, I will have done everything I can to earn this election. I'm not going to leave anything on the field."

Fitzgerald, meanwhile, has received \$4,000 from the Portland Metropolitan Association of Realtors PAC (which she applied for) but mostly has relied on smaller donations. Another sizable donation came from retired U.S. Sen. Dennis DeConcini of Arizona, who is Fitzgerald's uncle.



PMG PHOTO - Wilsonville mayoral candidate Julie Fitzgerald has raised most of her money from small donations.

Overall, Fitzgerald said she has tried to find ways to cut costs, including enlisting volunteers and refraining from hiring consultants.

"Can a citizen be supported by local citizens around town? Can that work? I don't know," she said. "Or do the big contributors make the decisions? I guess we'll find out."

In the council race, Budiao has accumulated more than \$13,000. Along with the \$5,000 from the Jobs PAC, he has received \$2,000 from James Bisenius, a former hedge fund CEO, and \$1,000 from Findlay Wilsonville Jeep/Ram General Manager Tim Graves (who also donated to West). Haider, meanwhile, has had \$2,000 of his \$2,300 in fundraising come from the Jobs PAC.

Budiao said he first met airport businesspeople while visiting the airport years ago. He said he hasn't made any promises to airport leaders and that he would represent the interests of Wilsonville residents, not the airport.

"They've never asked me to sway anything," Budiao said. "Unfortunately it looks that way and it's not really so."

Collecting large contributions isn't the only way to fund a campaign.

Linville has actually raised more than \$11,000 with only contributions of \$300 and under. She said she sent letters out to community members who might support her asking for small donations of \$50 or \$100. And she said she rejected one corporate donation offered to her.

"I feel pretty strongly that, in my campaign, I'm selective about where my funding sources come from," she said. "I don't want any perception that I might be obligated in the decisions I make should I be elected to city council."

Meanwhile, Council President Kristin Akervall has accumulated more than \$5,000 in donations, \$750 of which derive from Knapp or the Tim Knapp for Mayor PAC. Tim Knapp for Mayor also donated \$500 to Fitzgerald's campaign.

While campaign funding is clearly to his advantage, West felt that the rest of the council is a part of the establishment status quo and that gives them their own leg up.

"There is this cohesive group that is a tight unit that I'm clearly not a part of. I think the mayor has every right to support whoever he wants," West said.