

Published: 04.02.2006

## Early-education initiative backed

By Howard Fischer

*CAPITOL MEDIA SERVICES*

PHOENIX — Republican business owners, and developers in particular, are providing the financial muscle behind the campaign by a pair of Democrats to boost tobacco taxes to fund early-childhood education programs.

Reports filed with the state show that more than \$1.6 million has been contributed to an initiative drive to help ensure that children are ready to learn by the time they start school. And that doesn't include another \$200,000 Nadine and Eddie Basha and the companies they control put in early on to research the issue before going public.

The list of donors is topped by home builder Ira Fulton, who has a history of donating to Republicans, who gave \$251,000 from his Tempe-based company. Unlike candidate races, state law permits both individual and corporate donations to issues campaigns, with no limits on amounts.

But Fulton indirectly has raised a lot more by reaching out to others, particularly Republicans, to persuade them to open their checkbooks. One of those is attorney Leo Beus, who came up with \$100,000.

"We're in desperate shape in Arizona with the quality of our education," said Beus.

"The better our state is all the way around, the more successful we'll be in the development world," said Scott Rehorn, a principal with RED Development, who gave \$50,000, with an identical amount from partner Michael Ebert.

Rehorn said he donated because he sees a widening gap between those with money and those without.

"If we don't do something about it now, it's going to be a major problem," said Rehorn, who has two children — children he said who are lucky enough to have access to a good education.

The initiative campaign would impose an 80-cent-a-pack tax on cigarettes. The proceeds — estimated at \$150 million a year — would be divvied out by a special board to deal with "unmet needs" for children 5 and under, with some of that cash specifically earmarked for children in poverty.

The measure was crafted by Nadine Basha, a former member of the state Board of Education who has a master's degree in early childhood education and taught school before setting up a firm that helps employers develop child-care programs for workers.

What would be funded will vary by community.

Under the proposal, a new state board would form regional councils, each to determine the needs in their own communities and then review applications by public and private organizations for funding to fill those needs.

Mrs. Basha said that could be quality child care for working parents. But it also might be providing health screenings for infants, educating parents about early childhood formation and teaching pediatricians to recognize developmental problems in children.

If approved, the state tax on a pack of cigarettes would hit \$1.98 a pack. Mrs. Basha said she chose the tobacco tax for political reasons: It raises the right amount of money and "this is what we know will pass."

Developer Ross Farnsworth, who gave \$105,000, said he is not concerned about raising taxes. Farnsworth, who has given in the past to various Republican candidates and causes, said he sees this as an investment that will bear financial fruit.

"If that could be put into effect, it would keep the prisons not so full," he said.

"People would learn to read, do things," Farnsworth continued. "It would give them self-esteem."

The fact that the Bashas are Democrats — Eddie himself ran for governor — appears not to deter donors.

Beus, who describes himself as a "pretty conservative Republican," said he shares Nadine Basha's conclusion that voters need to step in. "I don't think the Legislature would ever solve our education problems," he said.

Other donors with a history of giving to Republicans include Tucson developer Don Diamond, Tucson auto dealer Jim Click Jr. and Paradise Valley developer Gerald Bisgrove. The Hensley Companies, owned by the parents of Cindy McCain, wife of the state's senior U.S. senator, also kicked in funds.

All content copyright © 1999-2006 AzStarNet, Arizona Daily Star and its wire services and suppliers and may not be republished without permission. All rights reserved. Any copying, redistribution, or retransmission of any of the contents of this service without the expressed written consent of Arizona Daily Star or AzStarNet is prohibited.