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Settlement discloses big donations to court race  
 Trial lawyers contributed about \$560,000 to the unsuccessful candidate  
 by ASSOCIATED PRESS

BELLEVILLE (AP) - Trial lawyers contributed about \$560,000 to a group that supported the unsuccessful Democratic candidate in last year's state Supreme Court race for the seat from southern Illinois, an election that broke state and national spending records.

In settling a complaint filed with the state board of elections, a group called the Justice For All Foundation identified the attorneys as contributors to candidate Gordon Maag, the Belleville News-Democrat reported Tuesday. The donors' names had been previously undisclosed by the group.

The settlement was first detailed Saturday by the St. Louis Post-Dispatch, which reported last November that Maag and Lloyd Karmerier, the Republican who won the election, were heavily aided by nonprofit entities that used a loophole in state campaign laws to obscure the sources of their money.

The Illinois Campaign for Political Reform, a nonprofit public advocacy group, filed the complaint Feb. 10 against the East Alton-based foundation to force them to disclose donors. The group has a similar complaint pending against the Illinois Coalition for Jobs, Growth and Prosperity - a coalition of business groups in the state - that donated about \$505,000 in support of Karmerier.

Karmerier and Maag spent a combined more than \$9 million on the race. Business groups that claimed juries award too much money in lawsuits tended to donate to Karmerier, while trial lawyers who can earn large fees from class-action and personal injury lawsuits frequently contributed to Maag.

State law requires anyone donating at least \$150 to a campaign be publicly identified in reports filed with the state elections board. But if someone gives that money to a nonprofit corporation - in this case the foundation and the coalition - that group can give the money to a political committee. The only public information then is about the donation by the nonprofit, and the name of the original donor is secret.

The Justice For All Foundation released its donor list voluntarily as part of a settlement with the Illinois Campaign for Political Reform.

"Ultimately, we think the foundation did the right thing," Cindi Canary, Illinois Campaign for Political Reform's director.

The attorneys who donated through the Justice For All Foundation include some of the most prominent names in the Metro East legal community, including Randy Bono of East Alton, a former Madison County judge who contributed \$290,000; the SimmonsCooper law firm of East Alton, which contributed \$215,000; and Steve Tillery, a Belleville attorney who donated \$30,000, the newspaper reported.

The foundation and the attorneys have not been accused of any election law violations.

The attorneys who donated to Maag through the foundation had also publicly donated money to his campaign. Publicly reported donations to Maag included \$550,000 from Bono, \$535,000 from SimmonsCooper partners Jeffrey Cooper

and John Simmons, and about \$195,000 from Tillery and his firm.

Bono on Tuesday said much of the donations through the nonprofit foundation were meant for advertising to counter what he called "anti-civil justice rhetoric" by pro-business groups during the campaign.

"A lot of that money did not go to Maag-Karmeier," he said, challenging the Illinois Coalition for Jobs, Growth and Prosperity to publicly identify its contributors. "We've come clean; why don't they?"

Doug Whitley, president of the Illinois Chamber of Commerce, which helped create the coalition, said the organization predates the Supreme Court campaign and got donations for various purposes.

"It's like vegetable soup. We raised money, and all of that money went into a pot," he said. "It's not possible to distinguish individual donors' contributions to that political activity."

Calls to Tillery, Simmons and Cooper were not immediately returned Tuesday.

Canary said she was at a loss to explain why the attorneys wanted to keep secret their donations to the foundation.

"It seems very odd to me that major contributors who have given publicly would take this route to give under the radar," Canary said Tuesday.

Maag, who failed to retain his seat on the state's Mount Vernon-based 5th District Appellate Court, recently moved to Alabama. A \$110 million federal lawsuit he filed against various business groups over an allegedly defamatory campaign flier during the Supreme Court race is pending.

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