

# Democratic power broker directs \$1 million to DeSantis PAC

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Ricardo Ramirez Buxeda/AP

Gov. Ron DeSantis speaks at a press conference at Kraft Azalea Park in Winter Park, on Thursday, January 17, 2019. This year, DeSantis set up a political committee that aims to defeat ballot amendments that would legalize marijuana and protect abortion rights. A prominent Democratic campaign consultant directed \$1 million from a committee he controls to DeSantis' fund — but won't say why (Ricardo Ramirez Buxeda/Orlando Sentinel).



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TALLAHASSEE— A prominent Democratic consultant directed \$1 million to a fund set up by Gov. Ron DeSantis to defeat two ballot amendments important to the Florida Democratic Party, one to legalize marijuana and the other to secure abortion rights.

The move by Pradeep “Rick” Asnani, president of Cornerstone Solutions, raised red flags among state party officials and some of the consultant’s clients, who are concerned their donations to a committee Asnani controls may have been passed through to the governor’s anti-marijuana and anti-abortion efforts.

Asnani’s clients includes longtime Palm Beach County Sheriff Ric Bradshaw and other Democrats seeking state and local office, as well as political powerhouses like the Seminole Tribe and Florida Power & Light.

“I was shocked to learn that he transferred \$1 million to an entity that is against Amendment 3 and Amendment 4,” said Mack Bernard, a former Palm Beach County Commissioner who hired Asnani as his campaign manager and was elected to the state senate in a special election in June.

Bernard said he personally authorized the \$70,000 transferred from his Friends of Mack Bernard committee to Asnani’s committee in July, prior to Asnani’s donation to DeSantis. Bernard said he assumed he was giving to a committee that supported Democratic candidates and causes. He said he supports both the abortion and marijuana amendments.

Asnani is chairman of Floridians for Economic Leadership, which made the donation to DeSantis’ Florida Freedom Fund on July 25, campaign reports show. Asnani’s donation is the largest single contribution to DeSantis’ fund, which has raised \$2.5 million so far and was set up by the Republican governor to fight both the abortion and marijuana amendments on the Nov. 5 ballot.

“I don’t discuss my political contributions,” Asnani told the Orlando Sentinel when asked why he made such a generous contribution to a Republican governor fighting two ballot initiatives of high importance to state Democrats and if his clients knew about it.

As chairman of the committee, Asnani can spend the money as he sees fit, even if the people, businesses and committees expected their donations to go to certain causes, said Glenn Burhans, a lawyer who has worked on many ballot initiatives in the last 25 years and helped draft the language for Amendment 3, the measure that would legalize marijuana.

Such committees have statements of purpose but those are vague and offer no guarantees, Burhans said. There may be an understanding between the chair and the donors that their money will be used for a particular purpose, but nothing requires them to say what it will be used for.

“It is up to the chair’s discretion,” Burhans said.

Bernard said he called the committee’s treasurer, who assured him that his donations did not go to DeSantis, but there is no guarantee of that since all the donations go into the same account.

“As we learn in this business, there are always things that take you by surprise,” Bernard said, adding that he would talk to Asnani about the donation when he gets the chance.

Once the money is in the committee’s account, it is essentially comingled, Burhans said, unless there’s a way to earmark a specific donation.

Both the abortion and marijuana amendments are citizen-driven ballot initiatives that require at least 60% voter approval to be placed in the state constitution.

If approved, Amendment 3 would make it legal for adults over 21 to buy and possess up to three ounces of smokable marijuana and 5 grams of cannabis concentrate. Amendment 4 would prevent the government from restricting a woman's access to abortion up to the point of viability or in the case of incest or rape.

They are both well-funded and outspending the opposition's efforts by wide margins. Smart and Safe Florida, the committee set up to promote Amendment 3, has raised \$71.6 million to date while Floridians Protecting Freedom Inc. has raised \$47 million to support Amendment 4's passage.

Keep Florida Clean has raised just over \$12 million to fight Amendment 3, with the \$12 million coming from Ken Griffin, a hedge fund manager and supporter of DeSantis. Hemp industry officials promised to direct \$5 million to efforts to fight Amendment 3 after DeSantis vetoed a bill that would have severely regulated the state's hemp industry.

Florida Voters Against Extremism, an anti-abortion committee, has raised \$1.8 million to fight Amendment 4 while the Florida Right to Life's Do No Harm Committee has raised \$109,000.

The Floridians for Economic Leadership committee was set up to support candidates and ballot issues at the state, county and city levels, according to its statement of purpose filed with the Division of Elections. Since January 1, 2023 it has raised just over \$1 million, most of it from real estate and development interests, investment firms and political committees.

After the DeSantis donation, about \$60,000 remained in its account, raising concerns about whose donations contributed to the \$1 million that went to the DeSantis committee that is fighting the marijuana and abortion amendments.

"It's bothersome, but I can't control what Rick does," said Rep. David Silvers, D-Lake Clarke Shores, a client who doesn't support Asnani's action and hasn't contributed to his committee in nearly a decade.

Silvers, who is running for state senate in 2026, said he supports both Amendments 3 and 4.

"I've got a two-year-old daughter and I am very much concerned about her future and support a woman's right to choose," he said.

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