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Conservative Whatcom PACs fined for reporting donations late

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Two conservative political action committees in Whatcom County were fined \$4,500 on Thursday, Dec. 5, for reporting contributions late and for failing to file reports electronically.

Save Whatcom and Whatcom First worked in tandem to campaign for conservative County Council candidates Kathy Kershner, Bill Knutzen, Michelle Luke and Ben Elenbaas; and Port of Bellingham candidates Dan Robbins and Ken Bell. Of these, only Robbins was elected on Nov. 5.

The Public Disclosure Commission levied the fines at a hearing on Thursday, Dec. 5.

PAC representatives Kris Halterman, Lorraine Newman, Chet Dow and Orphalee Smith walked into the hearing having agreed with PDC staff to pay \$3,000. Commissioners wanted a heftier fine and raised the penalty to \$4,500, fining Save Whatcom \$3,000 and Whatcom First \$1,500.

One third of each fine, or \$1,500 total, was deferred and will not be paid if the committees have no violations over the next four years.

Save Whatcom received \$145,150 from Oct. 9-11 and reported the donations on Oct. 17, three days late. Of that amount, \$144,000 came from coal companies, individuals with coal holdings, or SSA Marine, which intends to build a coal export terminal at Cherry Point.

Donations to Save Whatcom were funneled to Whatcom First to pay for campaign materials. Whatcom First also submitted reports late.

"This campaign raised a remarkable amount of money in a week," PDC Vice Chairman Grant Degginger said. "We need to be sure that the public has the opportunity to know in a timely manner what the organization is doing and who is contributing to the organization."

Officials from Save Whatcom denied trying to hide the identities of their donors. Halterman said in an interview on Monday, Dec. 9, that the contributions were made public before voters got their ballots.

Mike Estes, chairman of the Whatcom Democrats, said the late filing threw off his group's campaign strategy. Estes filed the complaint that led to the fines.

"When the money comes in late, it is a game changer," Estes said on Monday. "We didn't think they were doing anything at all."

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