

## Despite 2012 law, casino interests and Md. candidates remain intertwined

Written by Administrator

Tuesday, 05 August 2014 02:32 -

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Maryland lawmakers made it illegal in 2012 for casino owners to make donations to political candidates, a move intended to curb the influence of a deep-pocketed [industry new to the state](#).

The ban, however, is limited and has done little to stop the flow of funds associated with one prolific donor: William M. Rickman Jr., a Montgomery County developer and owner of [the Casino at Ocean Downs](#) on Maryland's Eastern Shore.

Eleven companies owned or affiliated with Rickman and his family have contributed more than \$86,000 to Maryland candidates since the ban took effect in October 2012, according to a Washington Post review of State Board of Elections records and company filings with the state.

Rickman has stopped giving as an individual and through the company he set up to operate the casino near Ocean City. But money has been donated to candidates through a separate Rickman company that owns the racetrack where the casino was built, and through a company established to provide food and beverage services there. And other companies associated with the Rickman family, including construction businesses and horse farms, have continued to give as well.

Critics say the sizable contributions tied to Rickman offer a prime example of how campaign finance reform often falls short of its goal: Donors simply find other ways to give.

Top 10 recipients of donations from non-casino companies affiliated with William M. Rickman Jr., owner of the Casino at Ocean Downs, after a 2012 ban on casino owners giving to Maryland political candidates.

1. Lt. Gov. Anthony G. B ~~\$20,000~~ ~~\$20,000~~, candidate for governor  
Donors: Capitol Machinery and Tool, Williams Grove Farm, Cambridge Plaza, Rickman Property Investments  
\$12,000
2. Howard County Executive ~~\$12,000~~ ~~\$12,000~~ Ulman (D), candidate for lieutenant governor  
Donors: Williams Grove Farm, Rickman Property Investments, River Sandy Landing  
\$8,000
3. Montgomery County Executive ~~\$8,000~~ ~~\$8,000~~ Isiah Leggett (D)  
Donors: W.M. Rickman Construction Co., River Sandy Landing  
\$6,000
4. House Speaker Michael ~~\$6,000~~ ~~\$6,000~~ Busch (D-Anne Arundel)

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Donors: Capitol Machinery and Tool, Cambridge Plaza, Racing Services

5. House Democratic Committee Slate

Donors: Rickman Travilah, Williams Grove Farm

6. Senate President Thomas Mike Miller Jr. (D-Calvert)

Donors: Cambridge Plaza, Racing Services

7. Sen. Catherine E. Pugh (D-Baltimore)

Donors: Spring Valley Associates, Rickman Travilah

8. Del. Sheila E. Hixson (D-Montgomery), chairwoman of Ways & Means Committee

Donors: Ocean Downs (racetrack), Cambridge Plaza, Rickman Travilah

9. Del. Eric Luedtke (D-Montgomery), chairman of Ways and Means subcommittee

Donors: Ocean Downs (racetrack), W.M. Rickman Construction Company

10. Del. Norman H. Conway (D-Wicomico), chairman of Appropriations Committee

Donors: Ocean Downs (racetrack), Cambridge Plaza, Rickman Firstfield Associates, Racing Services

Source: Maryland State Board of Elections

Efforts by most of the half-dozen other states that have sought to suppress donations by the casino industry have amounted to little more than “fig leaves,” said James Browning, regional director of state operations for Common Cause.

“In a perverse way, the richest, most sophisticated donors are going to be best-suited to find a way around a ban,” Browning said. “For them, it ends up being part of a shell game.”

Rickman declined repeated requests from The Washington Post to discuss the donations.

His businesses are set up as limited liability companies, which in Maryland do not have to publicly disclose their owners. The Post, however, found 11 companies that had donated since the ban took effect that have the same address as Rickman’s Rockville-based construction company or racetrack. In addition, Rickman or his father, who is now deceased, were listed as managers of the companies in other state filings.

Companies affiliated with the owners of the [Maryland Live](#) casino, in Anne Arundel County, have also made contributions since the ban took effect. But The Post’s review found no other pattern of giving as extensive as that from companies associated with Rickman. David S. Cordish, chairman of the Cordish Co., which developed Maryland Live, declined to comment.

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The biggest beneficiaries of Rickman's largesse are this year's [Democratic nominees for governor and lieutenant governor](#), Lt. Gov. Anthony G. Brown and Howard County Executive Ken Ulman.

Since October 2012, Brown and Ulman have reported receiving a combined total of \$32,000 in contributions from Rickman-affiliated companies, including \$20,000 on a single day in mid-April from five different companies.

Asked about the contributions, campaign manager Justin Schall said, "The Brown-Ulman campaign goes to great lengths to follow each and every Maryland election law, and we will continue to very carefully abide by the law."

Rickman company contributions also went to Senate President Thomas V. Mike Miller Jr. (D-Calvert) and House Speaker Michael E. Busch (D-Anne Arundel) and to several lawmakers who sit on the House Ways and Means Committee, which has jurisdiction over gambling and racing legislation, among other things.

"It seems like it's going against the spirit of what we were intending to do," said Sen. Edward J. Kasemeyer (D-Howard), chairman of the Budget and Taxation Committee. He did not report receiving money from any the Rickman companies identified by The Post.

One recipient, Del. Eric D. Luedtke (D-Montgomery), was unsure of the legality of a \$500 contribution he received last fall from Ocean Downs, the Rickman-controlled company that runs the racetrack where Rickman's casino [opened in January 2011](#).

So Luedtke contacted the Maryland attorney general's office for advice about whether he could accept the money. He was told that nothing in the 2012 law prohibited him from accepting the track's contribution, and he decided to keep the money. In May, Luedtke, who chairs a Ways and Means Committee panel with jurisdiction over gaming issues, also received a \$2,000 check from Rickman's construction company.

Luedtke said he's not entirely comfortable with forbidding donations by specific industries. "Why

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just casinos? Why not banks?" he asked. "If we're concerned that contributions can affect policy, then why not a broader ban?"

Proponents of casino donation bans argue that the industry's contributions flow so freely and are so corrosive that it's in the public interest to stop them.

Maryland's ban was proposed by Gov. Martin O'Malley (D) during a special session on gambling expansion. Lawmakers watered down the proposal, in part because of concerns about limiting the ability to give by people, like Rickman, who own other businesses in addition to casinos.

[The law that passed](#) bars donations from companies that hold casino licenses and from anyone who has an ownership stake of 5 percent or more in the casino. There are currently six such license-holders in the state. O'Malley had proposed a far broader ban, which would have included key employees of casinos and affiliated companies.

Del. Luiz R.S. Simmons (D-Montgomery), who pushed for tougher provisions, called it "a fairly porous law that anyone can circumnavigate with their eyes closed."

Del. Frank S. Turner (D-Howard), who received a \$250 contribution from the Ocean Downs track last fall, said it's hard to keep track sometimes of which company a donation comes from when the owner of the company also owns other businesses. Speaking of Rickman, Turner said: "We all know he has multiple companies with multiple objectives."

**Ocean Enterprise 589, the company that Rickman set up [to run the casino](#) , was an active donor to Maryland lawmakers until the ban took effect. Rickman was the sole owner of the company at the time the state**

**[awarded it a license in 2009](#)**

**. Since then, Rickman has restructured the ownership, retaining 35 percent and giving ownership stakes to other family members, Maryland gambling regulators said.**

According to State Board of Elections records, two of the company's contributions were

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received after Oct. 1, 2012, the start of the ban, which would make them illegal. But copies of the checks provided by a lobbyist for Rickman showed they were written and deposited in September.

Asked about the discrepancy, the two recipients — Del. Jolene Ivey (D-Prince George's) and House Majority Whip Talmadge Branch (D-Baltimore) — said that their campaigns made an error and should have reported the checks as having been received in September.

The ability to donate could be more strictly limited starting next year under a separately passed state law that targets a long-standing "LLC loophole."

Under existing law, an LLC can give a candidate \$4,000 per cycle. But starting in January, LLCs controlled by the same person or with substantially the same owners will be treated as a single entity under the law, subject to a single limit of \$4,000 per candidate.

Once the law goes into effect, all prohibitions that attach to a person's company — including the casino ban — will apply to other companies that person owns or controls, said Jared DeMarinis, director of the candidacy and campaign finance division of the state elections board.

Jennifer Bevan-Dangel, executive director of Common Cause Maryland, said she'll be watching to see whether donors find a way around the prohibition.

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