

# Detroit Free Press

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## Awash in money

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**Editorial**

That's something Michigan could use right now, but not necessarily in the case it applies to -- which is lobbying to influence lawmakers and the public on major legislation under consideration in Lansing. Michiganders are witnessing what may be a new level of spending, as the major utilities and Blue Cross Blue Shield of Michigan push for changes in how they do business.

Let's start with TV ads tracked by the Michigan Campaign Finance Network, a nonpartisan organization that researches political spending. Blue Cross put \$1.4 million into late winter ads; the Michigan Jobs and Energy Coalition, which includes DTE and Consumers Energy, spent \$1.9 million on its TV campaign. Note that other ads, from billboards to Internet spots, aren't included and would raise the total higher yet. Lobbying firms hired to help are not required to detail their spending, either.

The same companies also have put more than chump change so far in this election cycle into various lawmakers' campaign funds and political action committees: \$352,000 from Blue Cross, \$366,000 combined from DTE and Consumers. Amounts can range from a token \$150 to thousands of dollars that go into funds controlled by legislative and committee leaders who shepherd the bills.

More money yet may be flowing as both sets of bills head toward their final showdowns. And there's no way of tracking the kind of informal button-holing that may take place in settings like the Detroit Regional Chamber's policy conference on Mackinac Island this week.

But even for what can be tracked, as Rich Robinson of the Campaign Finance Network notes, Michigan's limited reporting deadlines mean legislation often passes before the tally shows up on the required forms. Other states do better, and Michigan should, too.

Not all such heavily lobbied deals prove bad for citizens, although the way that the Blue Cross-friendly bills were rushed through the House raised lots of eyebrows, and properly so. The electricity bills, though, went through many House hearings and have involved some compromise. The Senate is wrestling with both.

Better disclosure rules would at least give citizens more clues about the big issues that affect them. As it is now, Michiganders - - whether in their role as voters or as consumers -- have very little information about a system in which they cannot play at all.