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'Beneath the radar' group behind late pro-GOP ads

By LUCY MORGAN, Times Tallahassee Bureau Chief

Published November 2, 2004

TALLAHASSEE - An independent political group with secretive backers formed a week ago to buy ads in support of President Bush and Republican U.S. Senate candidate Mel Martinez.

"We like to fly beneath the radar," said Steve Truan, a Knoxville, Tenn., businessman. "We are highly supportive of what the president has done and we were willing to put our money where our mouth is and put out ads against negativism."

Truan is listed as the contact person for the Thanksgiving 2004 Committee, which bought ads in the *St. Petersburg Times* and *Tampa Tribune* last week. Jon Petersen of Omaha, Neb., is listed as custodian of the committee's records. He could not be reached for comment.

The *Times* ad, printed with red headlines, thanked Martinez "for supporting traditional marriage" and gave a New York post office box as an address. The *Tribune* ad thanked Bush for keeping America "in safe hands" and listed the names of six couples.

A spokeswoman for the Martinez campaign said it did not see the ads and never heard of the group.

Truan said he and other men in Knoxville who formed the committee "are working with a larger group" he would not identify. He referred questions to Rob Scott of Knoxville, listed as a director of the Thanksgiving committee. Scott did not return calls.

Knox County Republican officials said they do not know the men who formed the group. The committee gives a Knoxville map shop as its address, which also been used by the Truan Family Partnership.

Georgiana Vines, a political columnist for the *Knoxville News Sentinel*, said she had never heard of the men.

The committee is the latest example of independent groups running ads without disclosing who is financing their efforts.

Most of the committees have registered with the Internal Revenue Service in the last few weeks and have yet to file reports identifying contributors. The Thanksgiving committee was created Oct. 25, four days after the deadline for filing campaign reports, leaving voters unable to determine the source of the money before today's election.

Another committee formed in July has spent hundreds of thousands of dollars on ads and direct-mail fliers criticizing Martinez's Democratic opponent, Betty Castor.

That committee, Florida Leadership Council, got most of its startup money from millionaire H. Wayne Huizenga of Fort Lauderdale. The committee was organized by Cory Tilley, former communications director for Gov. Jeb Bush, and David Johnson, former executive director of the Florida Republican Party.

-- Times researcher John Martin contributed to this report.

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