

Boston Business Journal

In Everett, as in Eastie, casino campaign groups are not what they seem

Galen Moore

Boston Business Journal

Date: Friday, June 7, 2013, 3:02pm EDT

Steve Wynn's firm isn't the only one pumping cash into the race to build an Eastern Massachusetts casino. Wynn Resorts is backing Everett United, [the pro-casino group disclosed Thursday](#) – but like other developers, Wynn has been loath to disturb the grass-roots illusion that adheres to the groups they fund, and state campaign finance law does little to compel them to do so.

We still don't know how much Wynn paid Everett United – and we probably won't, until eight days before the June 22 special election, when [municipal ballot question campaign law](#) will require Everett United to file a finance report.

We do know that Wynn rival Sterling Suffolk Racecourse LLC, which hopes to build a casino with Caesars Entertainment in East Boston, contributed \$1.1 million to a similar organization, [Friends of Suffolk Downs](#), as of the end of December. That's [disclosed in a 2012 financial report](#) on file at the Boston City Clerk's office. Everett United, which registered in April, hasn't had to file one yet.

"Every company that hires consultants and lobbyists and stuff has people who are working on their project," said Mike Saint, owner of Saint Consulting, whose connection to Everett United was [reported by a blogger last week](#), "and they're not putting out press releases."

Saint knows something about operating under the radar. The Hingham, Mass., firm [got into a legal fight for its life with an Illinois Wal-Mart developer](#), after it emerged that Saint had run a ground campaign against the project, funded by rival Supervalu.

Mike Saint told me his company did nothing wrong in Illinois and in some cases lawsuits are a cost of doing business. The bottom line, he said, is land-use issues involve campaigning and disclosing financial connections would undermine developers' efforts.

"You've got to organize people who want your product," Saint said. "The people who don't want a project are passionate in their opposition and they always participate. People who are positive about a project rarely participate. ... They don't come to the meetings."

That may be, but in East Boston at least, developers seem to be more than making up the difference in dollars. Set against Suffolk Downs and its million-dollar campaign fund is [No Eastie Casino](#), a ballot question committee opposing a casino at Suffolk Downs. They raised \$431.51 in 2012, according to their financial filing for the year.

Friends of Suffolk Downs makes no mention on its website's "about" page of its financial relationship with casino developers. Neither did Everett United, until this week. At least two prior news articles – [one on Boston.com](#), another [in the local Everett paper](#), presented Everett United as a community organization. [A Boston Globe article published today](#) made no mention of the organization's past public face as a grass-roots effort.

It wasn't until blogger Jay Pinho, a Columbia University student who says he lived in Everett for nine years, pointed out some funny-looking ties between Everett United and Saint Consulting, that the group disclosed its ties to Wynn in a letter to local news organizations.

"Wynn Resorts financially supports Everett United and its hundreds of volunteers committed to bringing our development to Everett," the company informed me in a statement. "We worked this past year to introduce our development plans and to inform the public," Suffolk Downs chairman Bill Mulrow wrote in a similar statement. Neither addressed questions about how their on-the-ground campaign groups were presented to the public.

Everett United's "about" page still calls the group "a coalition of local residents and business leaders," and makes no mention of Wynn's financial support – other than promoting a "special VIP party" for "Founders Club" supporters, hosted by Wynn.

Pinho told me emphatically that he's not on anyone's payroll. I don't have any reason to think he's not telling the truth – but like the voters in Everett, I won't know for sure until eight days before the polls open.