

Breaking News: Independent Democratic SuperPAC Being Mulled, MDP Chair Says He's Unaware

MDP Shed Field Staffers Last Week

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Traditional Democratic funders, including some unions, are weighing the creation of a SuperPAC, independent of the Michigan Democratic Party (MDP), as the 2014 election draws closer, four well-placed sources tell **Inside Michigan Politics**.

IMP asked MDP Chair Lon Johnson today what he thought of an independent SuperPAC.

"First I've heard of that," he said.

SuperPACs are playing an increasingly large role in elections, including this month's Detroit mayoral face-off between **Mike Duggan** and **Benny Napoleon**. So it's likely that some sort of independent Democratic SuperPAC – perhaps several -- would be inevitable for this cycle.

However, three well-placed sources tell IMP that some funders have concerns about the MDP, which they worry has been spending more than in past cycles, even if fundraising has been up. So some funders are now looking for a place to park their dollars outside the party.

Johnson made his fundraising ability the centerpiece of his successful campaign earlier this year, vowing to double the MDP's \$1.5 million budget. That helped him oust **Mark Brewer**, who left the party with a \$400,000 nest egg, sources told IMP.

Johnson told IMP today that the MDP's finances and fundraising operation are in good shape.

Sources also told IMP that the entire field staff for the Joint Legislative Council (JLC), an MDP function, was laid off last week. Funders hadn't committed to the "look and see" program past 2013, but it came to an abrupt end on Thursday.

However, Johnson disputed the characterization of the staff being "laid off," calling it a "natural evolution."

"They served their purpose over the summer and spring," Johnson said. "We're trying to decide where to go next. ... We'll continue our organizational efforts, and move to the next

phase. The coordinated campaign will be gearing up. The economy of scale will be created at the coordinated campaign level.”

Johnson said some of the staff will be filling other positions, but not all will be coming back. The Dems will be “building a broader field program. There will be a gap between what was needed in the House and Senate and the coordinated campaign.” Johnson said that will kick into gear in spring.

Sources said there was agreement at a Thursday meeting among funders, which include unions and legislative caucuses, to cut their losses on the JLC. Some Democrats indicated that with Johnson’s fundraising, there should be plenty of money for the JLC.

Johnson said he’s not aware that funders had concerns about the council.

The JLC was formed during the 2012 cycle to help ensure greater cooperation in state House and Senate campaigns. There was also the idea that the JLC could bring continuity with changing legislative leadership in the era of term limits. The operation was headed up for the ’12 cycle by **Garnet Lewis**, who’s now running for the open 32nd state Senate seat. **Russ LaForte** most recently headed up the JLC.

LaForte declined to comment.

Field organizers were tasked with working with local Democratic parties on turnout for contested legislative races. Their job duties included working with Democratic candidates, conducting intensive voter contact activities and registering voters.

Several reasons were cited for the move on the field operation, which could save \$15,000 to \$25,000 per month, sources said. It was labor intensive and costly. Knocking on doors in the middle of winter was not considered the best use of resources.

Johnson also was known for never being a big fan of the JLC, dating back to his 2012 run for the state House of Representatives in the 103rd District. Some legislative leadership was agnostic about the JLC.

The end of the JLC’s field operation has stoked concern about the state of the MDP’s campaign operation on the eve of the 2014 cycle, where control of both the state House and Senate will be up for grabs. Johnson and other Democratic leaders have made taking control of both chambers next year a top priority.

Johnson wouldn’t say the JLC is done, but other Democrats believe otherwise.

“For all practical purposes, the JLC is dead,” one Democratic leader said. “It was on life support for awhile.”