

Billionaire brothers plan panel discussion on influence of money on politics

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RANCHO MIRAGE - A panel discussion on corporate spending and the influence of money on politics will be held Sunday prior to a planned protest outside a conference hosted by a pair of billionaire brothers opposed to President Barack Obama's policies.

The discussion, titled "Uncloaking the Kochs: The Billionaires' Caucus and Its Threat to Our Democracy," is set for 11 a.m. at the Hilton Garden Inn in Rancho Mirage.

Among the panelists: Robert Reich, labor secretary in the Clinton administration; Erwin Chemerinsky, dean of the UC Irvine School of Law; DeAnn McEwen, co-president of the California Nurses Association; and Van Jones, a former Obama adviser whose theories about the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks led to his resignation in 2009.

The forum will address the 2010 elections, which witnessed a historic GOP sweep of the U.S. House of Representatives, and how the Supreme Court's 5-4 decision in *Citizens United v. FEC* opened the door to increased corporate spending on political campaigns.

The court's decision largely overturned the McCain-Feingold Bipartisan Campaign Reform Act of 2002, which opponents argued muzzled businesses', unions' and nonprofits' freedom of speech under the First Amendment. Advocates contended the law leveled the playing field.

Panelists will also spotlight the causes supported by Charles and David Koch, who run Wichita, Kan.-based Koch Industries, with interests in oil refining, grocery product supplies and chemicals. Together, the brothers are worth an estimated \$35 billion.

They are gathering with invited guests for a four-day retreat, beginning Saturday, at the Rancho Las Palmas Resort, where participants will discuss "strategies to counter the most severe threats facing our free society," according to an invitation to the event.

The brothers have contributed to a range of causes generally hostile to the Obama administration's worldview, according to published reports.

Recent beneficiaries include the Washington, D.C.-based think tank Cato Institute and Arlington, Va.-based Americans for Prosperity Foundation.

Cato's scholars have challenged assumptions about global warming and its alleged impact on the environment. The organization has characterized the White House's cap-and-tax proposal as an enormously costly government overreach.

Foundation actively supported California's Proposition 23 in the November election. The measure, which failed at the ballot box, would have halted implementation of AB 32, the Global Warming Solutions Act.

It will require industries to cut back so-called greenhouse gas emissions to enable the state to lower its "carbon footprint" to 1990 levels. Prop 23 would have suspended AB 32 until California's unemployment rate fell below 5.5 percent, citing research that the law will increase energy costs for families and businesses.

The Riverside County Board of Supervisors endorsed Prop 23 in a 4-1 vote last September.

"(The Kochs) are actively standing in the way of our nation transitioning to a 21st century economy focused on clean energy and job growth creation," said Jones, now a senior fellow at the Center for American Progress, a think tank partly financed by billionaire George Soros, who backed Obama for president in 2008.

"They are the number one funders of climate change deniers," Jones added. "Their influence has global impact."

Common Cause, the Courage Campaign and Greenpeace are among the sponsors of the "counter-conference."

"Our goal here for the panel Sunday is to talk about the Billionaires Caucus agenda, its human impact and what can be done to restore the voices of ordinary Americans to our political process," said Common Cause President Bob Edgar.

In the Koch Industries invitation, Charles Koch wrote that "an exceptional ... line-up of speakers" is expected for his and his brother's event.

"Everyone benefits from the prosperity that emerges from free societies," Koch said. "But that prosperity is under attack by the current administration and many of our elected officials. Their policies threaten to erode our economic freedom and transfer vast sums of power to the state. We must stop -- and reverse -- this internal assault on our founding principles."

After the panel discussion at the Hilton, attendees plan to protest the Kochs' gathering, assembling across the street from the Rancho Las Palmas Resort. Law enforcement officials are anticipating anywhere from a few hundred to 1,000 people to take part.