

Tampa Bay Times

New think tank's veil of transparency

By Lucy Morgan, Times Senior Correspondent

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Last year, Tarren Bragdon left the conservative think tank he started in Maine to launch a new one in Florida.

The former Maine lawmaker and adviser to that state's governor told reporters at the time he was looking for a bigger stage. On June 27, he incorporated the Foundation for Government Accountability in Naples — and promptly waded into Florida politics.

So far, Bragdon's foundation has supported a handful of measures, including Gov. Rick Scott's plan to drug-test welfare recipients and his desire to expand a pilot program that has privatized Medicaid in parts of Florida.

The foundation's biggest achievement came last month when it unveiled its new website, floridaopengov.com. Like a growing number of similar sites around the country, it posts the salaries of thousands of government workers and other public records related to government spending.

Bragdon has pitched the effort as a way to bring more accountability to government. Give the masses a window into government spending, and officials will be more likely to be good stewards.

But Bragdon's effort to promote transparency does not apply to his own organization.

To be clear, the Foundation for Government Accountability and other nonprofits are not required to reveal their financial supporters. And Bragdon doesn't, except for the few givers who prefer their names be public.

That leaves us to guess at who is really behind the facts, reports and studies his think tank has produced to support conservative ideas.

Experts warn that a growing number of think tank organizations have been trying to pass off their opinions as unbiased fact. The organizations, they say, already have a working set of conclusions before they do any research.

"They are a decision in search of an opinion to support it instead of researching it to reach a decision," said James McGann, director of the Think Tanks and Civil Societies Program at the University of Pennsylvania. "Policymakers are often looking for a way to build a case and push an idea whether it is sound or not. An idea can become quite powerful and be totally baseless and yet have significant impact on policy."

There is plenty of evidence to suggest facts from the Foundation for Government Accountability should be taken with some skepticism.

Before he moved to Florida, Bragdon ran a similar Maine think tank that put a spotlight on state salaries and touted controversial Medicaid reforms, including drug testing for welfare recipients.

Some Maine legislators say the Maine Heritage Policy Center misrepresented the truth while leading tax-reduction measures.

Maine's House Democratic leader, Rep. Emily Cain, in a telephone interview with the *Tampa Bay Times*, said the Maine Center under Bragdon purported to be a nonpartisan, scholarly research center but consistently supported conservative causes and entertained conservative speakers, including Florida Sen. Marco Rubio, former Gov. Jeb Bush and antitax guru Grover Norquist.

"Most of their staff members are former Republican operatives who played roles in political campaigns," Cain said. "They are a public relations firm for conservative policy ideas. And the data doesn't always hold up when it hits the ground in public hearings."

Bragdon's Florida think tank makes no secret that it advocates for a certain point of view. Its website has many buzzwords from the tea party movement.

The foundation's stated mission: "To make Florida the most economically vibrant state through sound public policy centered on the free market, limited government and an individual's right to succeed."

The foundation's government accountability website is strikingly similar to others that have popped up across the country — wisconsinpengov.org, kansasopengov.org, louisianasunshine.org and more.

Conservatives promoting smaller government and free market solutions have been among the biggest users of the think tank strategy. In part, that's because of powerful backers, including the billionaire Koch brothers.

David and Charles Koch run Koch Industries Inc., one of the world's largest private companies whose holdings include Georgia-Pacific, makers of Dixie cups and Brawny paper towels. In recent years, the Kochs have given millions of dollars to educational institutions, foundations and programs that study and promote their view of a free-market system. They also have donated money to universities, including Florida State University, on the condition that they get to approve faculty hires and curriculum.

Bragdon said the Kochs have not donated to his endeavor.

"There are a lot of individuals and foundations that give money to the free-market movement," Bragdon said. "The Kochs are a small but significant part of a really big movement. I would welcome any money that the Koch brothers want to send this way."

But a partial list of donors posted on the group's website includes Robert A. Levy and the Atlas Research Foundation. Both have ties to other Koch-supported foundations or Koch family enterprises.

Levy is board chairman of the Cato Institute, a think tank created in 1974 in Kansas as the Charles G. Koch Foundation. Atlas is a Washington, D.C., think tank whose trustees include two men who worked for the Koch Foundation or the Koch family.

Last year Charles Koch wrote opinion pieces for the *Wichita Eagle* and the *Wall Street Journal* defending the causes he and his brother have supported.

"In recent years, we have stepped up our efforts to deal with the enormous threats to the future well being of the people of this country," he wrote. "This has prompted some extreme criticism. From the White House to fringe bloggers, we are now being vilified, mischaracterized and threatened."

As a result, Koch said, he and his brother are working "even harder to advance economic freedom and prosperity."

Two of the brothers from Kansas have pricey homes in Palm Beach County. David Koch owns a \$37 million oceanfront mansion. William Koch, owner of

Oxbow Carbon, an energy company based in Florida, is a yachtsman who once won the America's Cup. He owns a \$25 million home on Ocean Boulevard in Palm Beach.

Despite the mystery behind its financial supporters, Bragdon's new website was introduced Jan. 9 at a Tallahassee news conference by Florida's chief financial officer, Jeff Atwater, and a handful of legislators who praised the effort. Gov. Scott and House Speaker Dean Cannon issued written statements calling the site "an important resource."

Atwater, whose agency posts its own information online about government vendors, said the state has no financial arrangement with the foundation and no knowledge of its contributions.

"They contacted us and wanted to put our stuff on the Internet and we said, fine, here you go," Atwater said. "The only thing I have done is endorse more transparency."

Times researcher Caryn Baird and staff writer Becky Bowers contributed to this report. Lucy Morgan can be reached at lmorgan@tampabay.com.