

Legislators spending more to inform voters

Maine lawmakers defend mailings to constituents, but the cost has its critics.

By **KEVIN WACK**
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The cost of staying in touch continues to rise in Augusta, as state lawmakers spend more tax dollars on mail to their constituents.

Members of the Legislature spent about \$160,000 on postage in the first 11 months of this year, roughly \$50,000 more than they spent in about twice as much time during 2003 and 2004, according to state records.

Postal spending rose by 94 percent from the 2003-04 legislative session to the 2005-06 session, easily outpacing inflation and increases in the cost of postage, according to previously released records.

Although House Speaker Glenn Cummings, D-Portland, could not be reached for comment this week, he has defended the mailings as a way to let the public know that lawmakers care about their concerns.

"I would say being accessible is very important," Cummings said in an interview earlier this year.

Some critics are questioning

POSTAL SPENDING

POSTAGE SPENDING

by members of the Maine House of Representatives:

- Jan. 2003-Dec. 2004: \$35,933.70
- Jan. 2005-Dec. 2006: \$95,378.45
- Jan. 2007-Nov. 2007: \$58,589.39

POSTAGE SPENDING by members of the Maine Senate:

- Jan. 2003-Dec. 2004: \$73,919
- Jan. 2005-Dec. 2006: \$117,580.88
- Jan. 2007-Nov. 2007: \$103,315.52

whether the increased postal spending has a second aim: boosting incumbents' re-election chances.

"Especially in an era when constituents are easily reached by e-mail or instant messaging, you would think that the spending on postage might have leveled off or even decreased," said Phil Harriman of Yarmouth, a former Republican state sena-

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tor and a longtime critic of legislative perks.

"And if they can't come to grips with the postage, imagine what it's going to be like when they need to find hundreds of millions of dollars of expenditures that need to be reduced."

In interviews earlier this year, legislative leaders said that they were not setting a specific budget for postage expenses, with the funds coming from a larger part of the Legislature's budget.

In the Maine Senate, postal spending totaled \$103,315 in the first 11 months of this year, according to the recently released state records. That was up 69 percent from 2006, and up 224 percent from 2003.

The Senate has a policy that bars its 35 members from sending out more than 250 pieces of mail per week, but Senate President Beth Edmonds, D-Freeport, has said that she sometimes grants exceptions to that rule.

In the House of Representatives, postal spending totaled \$58,589 during the first 11 months of this year. Over the

two previous years, House members spent \$95,378. And in the two years before that, postal spending by the House totaled \$35,933.

The House has a policy that bars unsolicited mass mailings, but House Majority Leader Hannah Pingree, D-North Haven, has acknowledged that some mailings have been questionable under that policy. Some lawmakers have sent form letters to constituents enclosing reports on fish-stocking levels in nearby lakes and rivers, even though the constituents never asked for the reports.

The financial reports also show that Democrats, who hold majorities in the House and Senate, have on average been spending more for postage than Republicans.

Senate Democrats spent an average of \$3,310 on mailings from January through November, compared with \$2,572 by Republicans.

In the House, Democrats averaged \$423 in postal spending during the first 11 months of this year, compared with \$341 by Republicans.

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