

Fireweed and the Solutions Caucus

How a Progressive Consulting Firm Manages Republican Primary Campaigns with Out-of-State Money

March 2026 • All claims sourced to public filings

1. The Operation

In January 2026, a Helena political consulting firm called **Fireweed Campaigns Inc.** began billing Republican primary candidates for campaign management services—typically \$3,000 per month plus \$900 for compliance. Within the same weeks, every member of Fireweed’s staff made \$470 maximum contributions to those same candidates. A Wyoming-based PAC funded by progressive dark money contributed \$470 to the same slate. A retired Bay Area investor who sits on the board of Montana’s largest nonprofit news outlet wrote the same checks to the same candidates on the same schedule.

This is not speculation. It is documented line by line in filings with the Montana Commissioner of Political Practices.

Source: MT COPP donation and expenditure filings, January–March 2026.

Fireweed Campaigns is run by **Lauren Caldwell**, who simultaneously serves as Political Director of the Montana Federation of Public Employees—the teachers’ union. Her chief operating officer, **Kiah Abbey**, has served as Board Treasurer of the Montana Abortion Access Program for twelve years. Her operations manager, **Audrey McCue**, previously ran the Lewis and Clark County elections office, where she oversaw acceptance of \$215,000 in Zuckerberg-funded CTCL grants in 2020. Her communications consultant, **Caitie Butler**, is simultaneously the spokesperson for Montanans for Nonpartisan Courts—a progressive ballot campaign that operates out of Fireweed’s own PO Box and pays Fireweed \$126,299 for management.

Sources: MT SOS filing, Fireweed Campaigns Inc. (D1414685); MFPE staff directory; LinkedIn profiles; KTVH, October 2020; MT COPP filings.

These are the people managing Republican primary campaigns in Montana.

2. The Candidates

COPP filings identify seventeen Republican primary candidates receiving coordinated donations from Fireweed staff in 2026. Eleven of them are also paying Fireweed for campaign services. The donors are the same for nearly every candidate: Caldwell, Abbey, McCue, Butler, a retired investor named **Anne Avis**, and **Way Back PAC** of Sheridan, Wyoming. Each gives the maximum \$470.

Candidate	Donations In	Paid to FW	Pay Ratio	Avis?
Bedey, David (SD 43)	\$3,279	\$12,081	3.7:1	Yes

Jones, Llew (SD 9)	\$2,820	\$8,932	3.2:1	Yes
Walsh, Kenneth (HD 69)	\$2,820	\$6,776	2.4:1	Yes
Barker, Brad (HD 55)	\$2,350	\$5,535	2.9:1	Yes
Binkley, Michele (HD 85)	\$2,820	\$6,416	2.3:1	Yes
Reksten, Linda (HD 13)	\$2,820	\$5,851	2.1:1	Yes
Vance, Shelley (SD 34)	\$2,350	\$2,438	1.0:1	Yes
Cochran, Curtis (HD 90)	\$2,820	\$3,761	1.3:1	Yes
Geise, Susan (HD 17)	\$2,820	\$2,516	0.9:1	Yes
Nelson, Russell (HD 67)	\$1,880	\$2,143	2.0:1	No
Fitzpatrick, John (HD 76)	\$1,410	\$2,129	1.5:1	No

Six more candidates received the coordinated donations without visible Fireweed payments: George and Melissa Nikolakakos, Valerie Moore, Eric Albus, Ed Buttrey, and Doug Martens. Additional filings may reveal paid relationships not yet documented.

Source: donations, spending, and summary sheets (MT COPP filings).

Susan Geise, now running for HD 17 and Republicans for Tester co-chair, is the former Lewis and Clark County commissioner who endorsed accepting the \$215,000 CTCL/Zuckerbucks grant that went to Audrey McCue’s elections office. She is now receiving Fireweed staff donations, an Avis contribution, a Way Back PAC contribution, and paid Fireweed campaign services. The circle closes tight.

3. Where the Money Comes From

Follow it backward.

Way Back PAC is registered in Sheridan, Wyoming. Its single largest donor is the **Global Impact Social Welfare Fund (GISWF)** of Alexandria, Virginia, which gave it \$500,000. GISWF is part of a “unified family of brands” under Global Impact Ventures. The Hopewell Fund—a nonprofit managed under the Arabella Advisors dark money network—granted \$18.4 million to Global Impact. GISWF separately granted \$2 million to the **Western Futures Fund**, a Wyoming 501(c)(4) whose donors are secret. **Western Futures Fund paid Fireweed Campaigns \$107,500 for “project management.”**

Sources: Hopewell Fund Form 990, Schedule I; GISWF Form 990, Schedule I (ProPublica); WFF Form 990 (2024), independent contractors; Way Back PAC donors (OpenSecrets).

The same network funds the progressive ballot campaigns Fireweed manages. GISWF-Montana gave **\$2.62 million to Montanans Securing Reproductive Rights** and \$100,000 to Montanans for Nonpartisan Courts. Unite America PAC—bankrolled by Kathryn Murdoch (\$4.25 million), Michael Bloomberg (\$2.5 million), Arthur Blank (\$2 million), and John Arnold (\$1.25 million)—poured **\$2.18 million into Montanans for Election Reform**, the ranked-choice voting campaign. Fireweed managed that campaign too, for \$132,619.

Sources: OpenSecrets, Unite America PAC donors; COPP filings.

Some of that same money flows to the Republican side of the operation. Unite America PAC gave \$75,000 to **Conservatives4MT**. Guarantee PAC—funded by Way Back PAC (\$250,000) and John Arnold (\$307,500)—gave another \$80,000. WPLN Action, funded by Melinda French Gates’ Pivotal Ventures, gave \$100,000. MHA PAC State Fund, backed largely by out-of-state hospital corporations, gave \$75,000. In total, 78% of Conservatives4MT’s \$422,579 came from out of state.

Source: COPP filings

Conservatives4MT spent roughly \$360,000 on mailers and digital ads supporting the same candidates Fireweed now manages—Binkley, Barker, Bedey, Cochran, Jones, and others—in the 2024 primary. The same donors fund progressive ballot initiatives and Republican primary campaigns through the same consulting firm.

4. What They Did Once Elected

This is where funding becomes policy.

In the 2025 session, two bills would have allowed partisan affiliation in Montana judicial elections—**Senate Bill 42** and **House Bill 838**. Both passed committee on party lines. Both died on the House floor because a bloc of Republicans crossed over to vote with Democrats.

SB 42 failed 41–59 on April 1. Seventeen Republicans voted No. **Ten of those seventeen are on the 2026 Fireweed slate:** Barker, Bedey, Buttrey, Fitzpatrick (John), Jones, Moore, Nikolakakos (George), Nikolakakos (Melissa), Reksten, and Walsh. Had they voted with their caucus, the bill passes 51–49.

HB 838 failed 46–54 on April 7. Twelve Republicans voted No. **Nine of those twelve are on the Fireweed slate:** the same group minus Fitzpatrick. Had they voted Yes, the bill passes 55–45.

Source: Montana Free Press Capitolized legislative tracker, SB 42 and HB 838 vote breakdowns.

The campaign to keep courts nonpartisan—Montanans for Nonpartisan Courts—shares its mailing address (PO Box 87, Helena) with Fireweed Campaigns. It **pays Fireweed \$126,299** for project and communications management. GISWF-Montana gave the committee \$100,000. Western Futures Fund gave it \$10,000. Caitie Butler, who makes coordinated \$470 donations to the Fireweed candidate slate, is its spokesperson.

The same money that pays for the “keep courts nonpartisan” campaign funds the consulting firm that manages the legislators who voted to keep courts nonpartisan. The same staff who run the campaign donate to those legislators at the statutory maximum.

5. The Infrastructure

Bruce Tutvedt, former state legislator from Kalispell, is the bridge. He serves as President of Montanans for Election Reform Action Fund—the \$2.18 million Unite America vehicle managed by Fireweed. He was also the largest in-state donor (\$25,000) to Conservatives4MT. His name connects the progressive ballot campaign to the Republican primary operation.

The PAC infrastructure is expanding. COPP filings show that Conservatives4MT, **Big Sky Fiscal Guardians**, and **Treasure State Stewards** share identical treasurers (Ross Fitzgerald), deputy treasurers (Roger Hagan), and banking (First Interstate Bank). The two new committees were registered on the same day—March 12, 2026. **Ted Kronebusch** sits on the boards of both Montanans for Election Reform Action Fund and Treasure State Stewards, linking the ballot initiative apparatus directly to the new PAC infrastructure.

Sources: MT SOS filings; MT COPP committee registrations.

6. The News Outlet

Anne Avis gave \$470 to eleven of the seventeen Fireweed-slate candidates. She is listed as “Retired” in every COPP filing. She is also Board Vice Chair of **Montana Free Press**, the state’s largest nonprofit news outlet and publisher of the Capitolized legislative tracker that covers these very races.

Montana Free Press’s 2024 major funders include the Arthur M Blank Family Foundation (\$300,000) and Arnold Ventures (\$150,000). Arthur Blank personally gave \$2 million to Unite America PAC. John Arnold personally gave \$1.25 million to Unite America PAC and \$307,500 to Guarantee PAC. Both PACs fund Conservatives4MT. Avis and her husband separately gave \$30,000 to the publication.

Sources: MTFP board page; MTFP Major Supporters, 2024; OpenSecrets PAC donor records.

This report does not allege editorial bias at Montana Free Press. It observes that the board vice chair of the state’s dominant political news outlet is personally participating in a coordinated donation pattern alongside the staff of a progressive consulting firm, directed at Republican primary candidates, and that the outlet’s largest funders are the same individuals who bankroll the PACs documented in this report.

Every dollar amount, date, and name in this document is drawn from public filings: IRS Form 990s, Montana Commissioner of Political Practices reports, Montana Secretary of State corporate records, OpenSecrets PAC donor data, and published news reports. The full source documentation package, including primary filings, is available as a companion document. This report does not allege illegality or draw legal conclusions.