

Frank LaRose's latest fundraising poses viability questions for his U.S. Senate campaign

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COLUMBUS, Ohio — Unless something changes dramatically, Secretary of State Frank LaRose's U.S. Senate campaign is in serious financial trouble with the Republican primary election just months away, according to a new report detailing his first several months of fundraising as an official candidate.

Late Sunday, LaRose reported raising just more than \$1 million from July 1 through Sept. 30, a mix of \$791,600 from outside contributors and \$250,000 in money he personally loaned to his campaign. That means his campaign has \$868,000 in its bank account.

That's less than the roughly \$1 million LaRose would need to run a single week of statewide television advertising, the largest and perhaps most important expense of any political campaign. And it's several times less than the cash currently available to his two main Republican primary opponents, Westlake businessman Bernie Moreno (\$5 million) and Chagrin Falls state Sen. Matt Dolan (\$6.7 million), according to the disclosures they filed over the weekend.

Worse for LaRose, Dolan and Moreno each are independently wealthy, have loaned themselves millions of dollars already and likely could loan themselves millions more if they needed to. The primary election is March 19, and the winner will go on to face Democratic U.S. Sen. Sherrod Brown in November.

In interviews, several Ohio Republican operatives, who spoke on condition of anonymity, said LaRose's relatively weak fundraising haul may be insurmountable and at the least will sow doubts in the eyes of potential donors and other close observers.

"People are free to run if they choose to, but the viability of this candidacy is on life support," one said.

Meanwhile, operatives aligned with LaRose's opponents relished going on the record to point out LaRose's financial troubles.

“LaRose fundraising number was underwhelming as expected,” said Chris Maloney, a strategist working for Dolan. “He needs a massive bailout in outside soft money, the precise resources he has long decried, to see this through.”

Turning the campaign around would require LaRose to either personally raise more money from October to December — a tall order, since a candidate’s first fundraising quarter usually is their strongest, and since fundraising typically slows down around the holidays — or hope that one or several benefactors will be willing to fund LaRose’s outside Super PAC, which has less strict campaign finance limits.

That group, the Leadership for Ohio Fund, [reported separately raising \\$1 million earlier this year](#), but isn’t scheduled to make another disclosure until the end of the year. LaRose’s report cuts off on Sept. 30, which means that it doesn’t include [an Oct. 3 LaRose fundraiser in Chicago that was attended by Richard Uihlein](#), a GOP megadonor from Illinois who has a track record of spending millions on Republican candidates and causes, including the failed August campaign to make it harder to amend the Ohio Constitution that LaRose backed.

“People who are sophisticated about giving money are going to look at this report and, especially since he’s running against two guys who can loan themselves large, unlimited dollars... Unless his Super PAC shows up with \$5 million, what happened in the report today is going to be bad news,” said another Republican operative.

Likely anticipating how it would go over, LaRose’s political team spent Monday cleaning up after the report, emphasizing his commitment to the race. LaRose’s top campaign strategist, Brett Bureck, issued a memo detailing their theory that LaRose is in good shape, thanks to his early polling lead, local endorsements and the \$2 million that he and the Super PAC have available.

The memo also pointed out that Dolan and Moreno trail LaRose despite spending millions of dollars on ads in last year’s Senate race, in which Dolan finished third and Moreno dropped out before the election. And, it said LaRose raised the money he did despite spending two weeks dealing with redistricting and another two serving in the military, since LaRose is a Green Beret and Army reservist.

And finally, LaRose is the only one of the three who has won a statewide election.

“While we know there is a great deal of work to be done between now and the primary, we know that Frank’s strong fundraising, political and polling put him in position to win the primary and to defeat [Democratic Sen. Sherrod Brown] in 2024,” Bureck said.

Rick Gorka, a campaign spokesperson, told cleveland.com and The Plain Dealer that LaRose's personal loan shows "donors, grassroots supporters and voters that he is all in the race."

"He has skin in the game," Gorka said.

The other Senate candidates campaign-finance reports largely were less remarkable, providing details most relevant to politicians, campaign insiders and other political junkies.

Dolan, whose family owns the Cleveland Guardians, reported raising \$1.09 million from outside contributors — an improvement from the \$308,000 he raised the previous quarter — and loaned himself another \$3 million, which brings his total personal investment in his race to \$7 million.

Moreno, a former luxury car dealer, meanwhile reported raising \$1.19 million from contributors — more than Dolan, but down from the \$2.29 million from the previous quarter — and loaning himself another \$3 million.

Meanwhile, Democratic Sen. Sherrod Brown, who doesn't have primary opponent, reported raising \$5.8 million, and \$11.2 million in his campaign bank account.