

Convenience store politics: Wawa increases donations to NJ politicians

By [Matt Friedman/The Star-Ledger](#)

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A new Wawa is shown under construction in Lodi in this September file photo. As the chain expands northward, it is also giving more money to politicians. (*Myles Ma/NJ.com*)

TRENTON — Next time you buy coffee, a breakfast sandwich or fill up with gas at Wawa, there's a good chance your money isn't only going to the convenience store chain.

It could also wind up in the campaign accounts of New Jersey politicians.

As the Pennsylvania-based Wawa expands its footprint into North Jersey after dominating the southern half of the state for decades, it has also expanded its campaign giving.

Since 2012, the company has dispensed at least \$21,800 to candidates seeking state office and political committees in New Jersey, according to a review of campaign records. That's nearly twice as much as in the previous 27 years.

Yet the stepped-up donations have not gotten the company noticed by at least one recipient. Assembly Minority Leader Jon Bramnick (R-Union) said he was surprised to learn he received \$500 from Wawa in 2013.

“I’m going to go from a small to a medium coffee based on their generous support of the party,” Bramnick said.

The increase in contributions came just after Wawa, which marks its 50th birthday this year, began opening stores in regions dominated by rivals like Quick Chek and 7-Eleven.

And while the ubiquitous chain inspires regional loyalty in South Jersey like few other businesses, it is no small enterprise.

The privately held company has 650 stores employing 22,000 people in New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Delaware, Maryland, Virginia and Florida, according to its website.

Although Wawa began its northern expansion with a store in Parsippany in late 2010, most of the openings came in 2012 or later in Morris, Union, Hudson and Bergen counties as well as Woodbridge in Middlesex County.

From 1985 to 2007, the company made \$13,400 in donations to New Jersey candidates for governor, Assembly and Senate. But starting in July 2012 — after five years of no donations to candidates on the state level — the company opened its wallet wide.

The company gave \$10,000 to the Republican State Committee — unofficially controlled by Gov. Chris Christie. Over the next year, it would also max out Christie’s gubernatorial campaign, giving \$7,200 to his primary and general election accounts combined.

By contrast, Wawa — whose annual revenue is estimated at \$9 billion — made no donations to the Democratic State Committee or Christie’s Democratic opponent last year, former state Sen. Barbara Buono.

However, the company did shower all four of last year’s legislative leaders — Senate President Stephen Sweeney (D-Gloucester), Senate Minority Leader Tom Kean Jr. (R-Union), then-Assembly Speaker Sheila Oliver (D-Essex) and Bramnick — with \$500 each.

And it gave at least \$1,000 in 2014, donating \$500 to the new Assembly speaker, Vincent Prieto, and \$500 to a state Senate Republican political action committee.

‘No correlation’

A spokeswoman for the company, Lori Bruce, said the rise in political donations was in no way related to its expansion.

“There is no correlation to our North Jersey expansion, nor have we put an emphasis on giving political contributions to North Jersey legislators,” Bruce said. “As Wawa continues to grow, in 2011 we made a strategic decision to have government relations become a formalized function.”

Nor has Wawa’s political largesse been limited to New Jersey. Its federal political action committee gave \$65,915 in campaign contributions in the two years leading up to the 2012 election, predominantly to candidates in Pennsylvania, breaking its previous record of \$53,545 in 2006.

“We recognize government relations is becoming an increasingly important part of how we operate and connect with our communities, including communities in the state of New Jersey,” Bruce said.

Wawa’s rivals haven’t been nearly as prolific. Quick Chek has given \$4,000 in the past 10 years, most recently in 2005, and 7-Eleven’s only recent donation, \$500, went to Christie’s 2010 inaugural committee.

There’s no evidence that Wawa made its contribution to influence decisions on any specific expansion projects. And while the most frequent government obstacles the company would be likely to run into are zoning issues, campaign reports show few donations to local candidates.

Melanie Sloan, executive director of the watchdog group Citizens for Responsibility and Ethics in Washington, said it was standard practice for companies to donate more as they expand, knowing they could run into governmental barriers and regulations later on.

“I think it’s more a matter of getting ahead of things, than a specific quid pro quo,” Sloan said. “Maybe they know they’ll need to be looking for more help. ... By the time you need a friend in the Legislature, it’s a little late. You want to be cultivating your friends all along.”

'A wawa guy'

The chain and the New Jersey Lottery announced with much fanfare a partnership to put self-service Lotto machines in all of its locations in the state. Asked if there was any connection to Wawa’s giving and the partnership, a spokesman for the governor, Kevin Roberts, simply said, “No.”

Still, Christie is partial to Wawa — a fact he made clear in an Oct. 15 debate with Buono.

“I’m a Wawa fan, and I think part of the reason for that is because my wife is from suburban Philadelphia and when we were dating we made frequent stops late in the evening to the Wawa to pick up some snacks,” Christie said. “So I’m a Wawa guy.”