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**Election lawsuits cost Wisconsin taxpayers nearly $3 million in 2020**

*By WisPolitics.com*

The legal fight over Wisconsin’s 2020 elections cost taxpayers nearly $3 million in private attorneys, according to bills obtained by WisPolitics.com.

And legal bills were still rolling in, as Gov. Tony Evers has indicated he’ll try to recoup some of his costs from those who filed the suits.

The bulk of the legal tab was the nearly $2.4 million GOP lawmakers spent in more than a half-dozen federal lawsuits that began ahead of the April election and stretched through the fall. It also includes the successful suit they filed with the state Supreme Court to prevent Evers from moving the April election via executive order.

Evers, meanwhile, dropped $279,210 on private attorneys he hired for various election issues, including former President Trump’s unsuccessful bid to overturn Wisconsin’s Nov. 3 results.

And the Election Commission’s tab hit $305,811.

A commission spokesman said the agency asks the Department of Justice for representation when it’s sued. But if DOJ indicates it may have a conflict, the commission then seeks permission from the governor to appoint private counsel.

A DOJ spokeswoman said the agency had previously advised at least one of the parties in the election lawsuits on a matter that she said precluded it from representing anyone in the case.

More than a half-dozen federal lawsuits were filed ahead of the April 2020 election seeking a host of changes due to the burgeoning COVID-19 pandemic, along with the action in the state Supreme Court to block Evers’ attempt to move back the April election amid the pandemic.

The federal issues reached the U.S. Supreme Court, which changed lower court rulings and allowed absentee ballots to be counted so long as they were received by 4 p.m. the Monday after the election. Typically, they must be received by 8 p.m. on election day to count.

In those suits, Assembly Speaker Robin Vos, R-Rochester, and former Senate Majority Leader Scott Fitzgerald, R-Juneau, were named as defendants in one of the actions. Legal bills attributed to that case accounted for $175,645 of the Legislature’s tab.

In five suits, the Republican lawmakers sought to intervene even though the state or national GOP — or both — had already been added as parties in the suits.

Some of those were combined into one action — including the one naming Vos and Fitzgerald as defendants — as largely Democratic plaintiffs made a push for changes to the November election. Of the Legislature’s bills, $1.2 million were attributed to the lead case in those combined suits.

A U.S. district court judge in the fall pushed back the deadline for absentee ballots for the November election only to have a split appeals court stay that ruling. The 7th Circuit Court of Appeals formally vacated the district judge’s ruling in December and terminated the case in January.

The second wave of election lawsuits started to hit after Joe Biden beat Donald Trump by fewer than 21,000 votes. Both Trump’s federal suit and one filed by his former attorney, Sidney Powell, named the Elections Commission and Evers as defendants.

Those suits — along with a state suit Trump filed — were rejected by the courts. The U.S. Supreme Court over the past month declined to hear all three suits.

Evers plans to seek sanctions against Trump and Bill Feehan, the plaintiff in the Powell suit, and reimbursement from the plaintiffs’ attorneys in those cases.

WisPolitics.com has been tracking the cost of private attorneys for much of the past two years. Since the start of 2019, GOP legislative leaders have now spent more than $7.1 million on legal bills stemming from lame-duck lawsuits, the election actions, redistricting and other cases.

Of that, more than $2.1 million went to several lawsuits over the December 2018 extraordinary session laws that Republicans approved. In those suits, Dem Attorney General Josh Kaul declined to represent anyone else because his powers were part of the suit and it created a conflict of interest.

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