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The cost of fundraising for Buffs

Folsom Field boasts a million-dollar view, and that's just how much a plan aims to get from 50 CU boosters

By Tom Kensler
The Denver Post

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The sky's the limit as fundraisers look to give the University of Colorado athletic department a boost of \$50 million. (Ronald Martinez, Getty Images)

An ambitious fundraising plan envisioned by University of Colorado alumnus George Solich

would seek \$1 million each from as many as 50 supporters to help finance CU athletics, and gain influence in key decision-making. That plan is in the exploratory stage.

Athletic directors contacted about such a plan say it could work but would need close supervision.

"There is a huge upside to having a structured group (of generous boosters)," Ohio State athletic director Gene Smith said. "But if, say, you're setting up a structured board and you define that they are 'advisory,' then you are opening yourself up to them having a level of input.

"You just have to pick the right people, you have to manage it. But it is the way of the world now. College athletics must survive on the private, philanthropic opportunities out there. That's going to get more and more important."

Colorado AD Mike Bohn said this past week that any large-scale fundraising effort, should it get the go-ahead, would be included under the umbrella of the current "Glory Colorado" campaign.

"No question we'd like to have a scenario like ('Fifty for \$50 million')," Bohn said. "But if you look at programs around the country and the number of \$1 million donors they have, they're not at that level.

"Do we have donors that have made \$1 million

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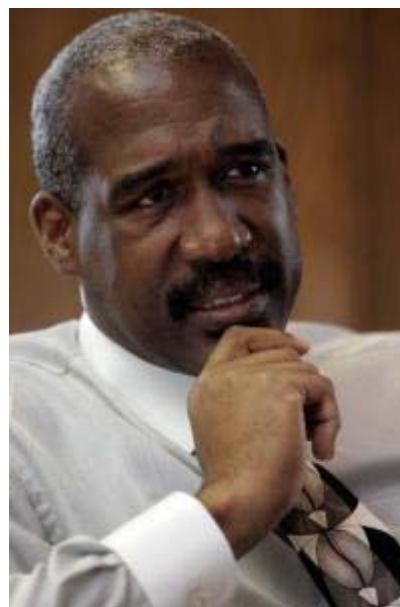
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or multimillion-dollar contributions? Yes. We're very proud of that and excited about that, and we'd like to develop more. But what we're really working on is Glory Colorado. We're working hard with our foundation people and our leaders and our major donors to try to formulate an opportunity for us to build a model based on traditional fundraising campaigns. We have top donors and also donors at other levels."

Booster contributions are vital for Colorado, which trails several Big 12 athletic departments in annual revenues. Figures published by the U.S. Department of Education for the fiscal year ending June 30, 2009, revealed that CU ranked eighth among conference members in revenues with \$49,859,693 (against \$48,207,325 in expenses), topping only Baylor, Kansas State, Texas Tech and Iowa State, which were close behind. But CU lagged far behind league rivals Oklahoma (\$81,487,835), Nebraska (\$74,881,383), Texas A&M (\$72,886,100), Oklahoma State (\$71,805,825) and Kansas (\$70,614,953). Texas (\$138,459,149) appears to be in a league of its own.



"College athletics must survive on the private, philanthropic opportunities out there. That's going to get more and more important." - Ohio State athletic director Gene Smith (AP file photo)

Oklahoma State's revenue figure would be down around Colorado's level if not for mega-booster T. Boone Pickens, the politically vocal oilman/investor who in 2006 gave his alma mater \$165 million, the largest single donation to a college athletic program in history. Coaches' salaries were boosted, and a complete redo of the football facility transformed a rusting, "Erector Set" structure into Boone Pickens

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Stadium, now one of the nation's opulent college venues.

Pickens also has written more than \$100 million in checks for projects elsewhere at OSU, including a geology building.

"Where the money comes from, I don't think that's critical," Oklahoma State AD Mike Holder said. "But if you want to beat the University of Texas, or the rest of the schools and win conference championships, or compete on a national level in any sport, you have to have resources."

No longer can any CU department depend on the state to pay the freight. State funding for the Boulder campus is expected to be sliced from 6 percent of the school's total budget to about 4 percent. In any case, athletic department expenses, including coaches' salaries, are generally covered by fundraising, corporate sponsorship and ticket sales.

"I think CU needs to get with the program and realize where they're at," said Buffs supporter Richard Engel, who owns an Aurora tavern. "If you have wealthy alumni stepping up and willing to fund things, you have to listen to them. If CU walks away from this — I don't know how they can cry poverty when they're turning down donors."

Bohn said he's not concerned about boosters having too much say in big decisions, such as hiring or firing coaches.

"There is a balance and respect that has been developed over time (with donors)," Bohn said. "I feel like that respect and collaboration is working well."

Ohio State's Smith previously was the AD at Arizona State, where he worked with the "Sun Angels" advisory group. Smith said he "worked very hard to ensure that they understood that they were advisory and that the final decision wasn't theirs."

"Everything is about honesty and openness, and knowing who is responsible for what," Smith explained. "I have a number of donors here at Ohio State that I consult when I'm making a decision, if I think they can give me some advice and I need a fans' perspective."

"In this business, it's good to have outside, objective views on what you're doing. We teeter between behaving like a private-sector entity in a public environment. So you need those outside views from the private sector, the fans, to help you make sure to balance that line."

A member of the University of Texas' unofficially named "Billionaire Boys Club," oilman W.A. "Tex" Moncrief of Fort Worth, believes there are advantages of having several significant boosters rather than a dominant benefactor such as Pickens at Oklahoma State or Nike co-founder Phil Knight with the University of Oregon.

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"The more people you have supporting it, the better it is," Moncrief said. "Texas has a lot of good supporters, as you know. It's a big school with a lot of graduates that realize that a football team means a lot to a college. If Colorado can get a good group of supporters, it would be great."

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