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SHORTGRASS COUNTRY by Monte Noelke

Last week, one of the contenders for the presidency dropped out of the primary races, explaining he'd "run out of gas." By "out of gas," of course, he meant his campaign coffers weren't taking in enough dough to pay for all the political expertise needed today to campaign for every office from treasurer at large of the local P.T.A. to the highest offices of the land.

We had a big dose of such wild extravagance in the last governor's race in our state. Three of the heftiest candidates spent between 40 and 50 million bucks polishing up their hair styles, designing and redesigning lapel widths and hemlines and keeping a 24-hour poll on public opinion.

One camp received so much good advice, a 20 percentage point lead was maneuvered into a resounding defeat. The losing candidate retired from public life; his political technicians, the Austin newspaper reported, were under contract by one of this year's statewide hopefuls.

The names of the big time managers aren't readily available in the Shortgrass Country. At a rally before the last primary, an aide for the state senator handed out a card with a list of names all ending in "ey" or "ie" on his firm. I had a hard time holding his attention. A 25-year-old political expert can tell the difference between a plain

voter and a potential contributor. But I did ask him to pass the word around to his successors and competitors that the grass roots was beginning to notice the results of these 50 million dollar extravaganzas being thrown on the air and in the newspapers. For instance, as I reminded him, 26.5 percent of the registered voters turned out for the widely publicized and masterfully drawn governor's race.

We are going to have to require all these political side businesses to register with the state. Once they are identified, my suggestion is to add their names to the top of the ballot so the citizenry can choose ultra mud slingers, or whatever choice of diversion they wish on the channels and in the news.

Some pretty big wins have been made around the tracks by betting on the jockey instead of the horse. The bright young campaign adviser managed to avoid me during the coffee session. I intended to tell him I was going to nominate his firm in the next election.