

## **Publix halts political contributions ahead of Parkland students' 'die-in' protest**

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Staring down the prospect of a public relations crisis — boycott threats and "die-in" protests included — over its donations to Republican gubernatorial hopeful Adam Putnam, Publix said Friday it has halted all corporate political contributions. The supermarket giant made the announcement moments before a "die-in" protest planned by David Hogg, a vocal Parkland school shooting survivor and gun control activist.

Despite the news, Hogg and dozens of protesters sprawled on the floor of a Coral Springs Publix for 12 minutes clutching sunflowers and signs that read "No NRA Money." Hogg and other students began their influential movement for gun control in the wake of the Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School shooting that left 17 dead and 17 wounded.

They've taken aim particularly at the National Rifle Association, and were angered at the news of the grocer's unprecedented support for Putnam, who once boasted he was a "proud NRA sellout".

At \$670,000 over the last three years, it's the largest contribution the company has made in more than two decades and possibly the biggest in company history. Publix is supporting Adam Putnam's run for governor like it has no politician before.

Moments before the protest began, Publix released a statement apologizing for putting its employees and customers "in the middle of a political debate" and announcing a suspension of corporate political donations as it reevaluates its donation process. "At Publix, we respect the students and members of the community who have chosen to express their voices on these issues. We regret that our contributions have led to a divide in our community," the statement read.

Protesters spread out on the floor of the Publix store in Coral Springs Friday, May 25, 2018, for a 12 minute "die-in" to protest Publix's support for Adam Putnam's gubernatorial campaign. The produce aisle protesters were flanked by a smaller group of counterprotesters chanting "NRA" and "Trump," but the demonstration stayed calm.

Diego Pfeiffer, an 18-year-old Stoneman Douglas senior who helped organize the demonstration with Hogg, said Publix's announcement proves that the die-in was successful. He and fellow supporters learned of the policy change after their protest.

By the time he left Publix just after 5 p.m., Pfeiffer had been on the property for about 14 hours. He and Hogg showed up around 3 a.m. to draw chalk outlines of human bodies within parking spaces. The outlines were eventually washed away by workers and rain. "I'm really, really happy, especially at the fact that peaceful protest actually works," he said. "It shows that people are listening even though a lot of people vocally don't support us."

Publix, Florida's largest private employer, is also one of the state's biggest political donors. This election cycle alone, Publix has donated \$2.1 million to state candidates, according to the Florida Division of Elections website.

In the 2016 elections, the database shows the company gave \$3 million. The donations have gone to both parties. Publix is suspending corporate-funded contributions, but its executives and employees can still give money to political causes. Hoyt Barnett, a corporate board member, has donated \$120,000 to Putnam's political committee, Florida Grown, over the last two years.

Putnam faces U.S. Rep. Ron DeSantis, R-Palm Coast, in the Republican primary for governor on Aug. 28. DeSantis tweeted Friday that the protests were "ridiculous." Shopping won't be a pleasure if left-wing agitators get their way. I'll always stand up for #2A!" he wrote.

Publix's decision to at least temporarily stop contributing money to political causes punctuates a rough week for Putnam. Florida's agricultural commissioner has been on the defensive ever since the Tampa Bay Times reported that Publix has invested an amount of money unprecedented for the company into Putnam's run for governor — reminding everyone that he declared himself a "Proud NRA Sellout" and setting off protests and calls to boycott the grocer.

Then on Thursday, the newspaper also pointed out that Putnam was set to attend a campaign fundraiser hosted by an Orlando man who'd been caught on video in 2008

shooting two Huskies after the dogs ran onto a cow pasture. Christopher Comins was acquitted of animal cruelty charges after he argued that he was defending cattle from the dogs.

Putnam canceled the fundraiser, but not before being slammed by several Democrats running for governor. "Adam Putnam should be ashamed of himself," said Tallahassee Mayor Andrew Gillum, one of the candidates. A spokesperson for Putnam's campaign said in a statement "nothing has changed" since the corporation's decision. "Adam Putnam supports Publix, which is Florida's top private employer. He is thankful for their support as Florida's candidate over the years.