Molly Munger pulls attack ads off air

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SACRAMENTO — As Gov. Jerry Brown prepares to ramp up his bid for higher taxes with campaign stops at college campuses, his chief rival offered him a reprieve Monday by pulling a withering attack ad off the air.

Molly Munger, the wealthy civil rights attorney bankrolling the rival tax-hike measure, Proposition 38, decided to pull a statewide ad that attacked Proposition 30 by portraying money flowing from a school house into politicians' hands with a child's voice saying, "that's why Sacramento's behind it."

The Proposition 30 campaign had seen its support plummet to barely above 50 percent in the most recent polls, a precarious position for a tax hike initiative with three weeks to go until Election Day.

The attacks "clearly weren't good for us," said Ace Smith, the campaign manager for Proposition 30. "But there was a public outcry, and we're glad they're pulling them."

Munger has assailed Proposition 30's own ads as "utterly deceptive," calling it a "budget patch," and not the pro-schools initiative she says her measure is.

Munger's ads, her campaign manager, Nathan Ballard, said, were "masquerading as Proposition 38, all the way down to using our core message, that the money was for schools and not Sacramento."

"We put up a gently comparative ad that established the difference between 30 and 38," Ballard said. "And the attention it generated was sufficient in setting the record straight."

Brown's measure hikes the sales tax by a quarter cent on the dollar and boosts income taxes on individuals who earn $250,000 a year. It raises about $6 billion a year, freeing up money to be spent on the $93.1 billion budget while wording off a nearly $6 billion trigger cut to schools, community colleges and universities.

Proposition 38 would raise income taxes on all but the poor to increase school financing by $10 billion a year for 12 years.

Munger's half-brother Charles Munger had also contributed $22 million to a campaign committee, the Small Business Action Committee, that has funded TV ads and mail literature opposing Proposition 30.

Brown's campaign had warned that the Mungers were on the verge of carving a legacy as the millionaires who killed funding for public schools. Even her supporters expressed discomfort with the attacks.

Many voters are considering voting yes on both initiatives, and Munger's campaign didn't want to lose them, Ballard said.

"We need them — they are gold," Ballard said.

With prospects for Proposition 30 getting shakier by the day, Brown is heading directly to a potentially significant source of support: college campuses.

The governor will take his appeal to college students at UCLA and Sacramento City College in appearances Tuesday and Thursday. He is likely to take a more visible role in the final three weeks of the campaign, Smith said.

Campaigning on campuses is sound strategy, especially in a presidential election year, said Jack Pitney, a political-science professor at Claremont McKenna College.

"It's a natural constituency," Pitney said, referring to college students. "They receive benefits from Prop. 30 and are less likely to get hit by the tax increase."

Brown intends to make personal appearances at elementary, middle and high schools, as well as universities and community colleges, Smith said.