

Publicly financed campaigns put the constituents first

You get what you pay for, right?

By the time you read this, folks will have had their say before the County Council on whether it should bring to referendum a proposal to implement a system of public financing for local election campaigns.

Council members Jon Weinstein and Jen Terrasa seek a setup similar to the one the Montgomery County Council approved in 2014, in which candidates participating in the voluntary program would forego the big contributions of business interests and political action committees in favor of small donations from citizens, which the county would match up to a predetermined limit.

The matching funds would keep candidates competitive with those who rely solely on private funding, and would give prospective office-seekers incentive to concentrate on grass-roots support and not chase the big bucks.

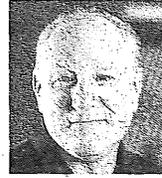
"It would lead to more civic engagement as candidates seek small donations," offered Emily Scarr, director of the Maryland Public Interest Research Group, which supports the referendum effort.

Maryland PIRG, figuring the probable number of candidates for county executive and the council, estimates our local government would need to set aside between \$2 million to \$2.5 million per election cycle, or between \$500,000 and \$625,000 a year. Weinstein and Terrasa's resolution specifies that a seven-member commission would annually determine the exact amount.

"Our charter is a little more restrictive than the Montgomery County charter," Weinstein noted. To implement the proposed system here requires a charter amendment. That's why the council has to take the measure to the voters, and why doing so will require four out of the five council votes.

Weinstein added that the Howard version could tweak Montgomery County's prototype. One alteration might be to give county taxpayers the option of designating that some set portion of their total tax bill goes toward the citizen-funded campaign system, sort of like the check box on your income tax form.

"So if the fund is \$2 million and we've collected \$100,000 (from the optional



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earmarks), then we'd only have to budget \$1.9 million" for that four-year election cycle, Weinstein said.

The naysayers will quote U.S. Sen. Everett Dirksen, who famously is supposed to have said, "A million here, a million there, pretty soon you're talking real money."

But who would you rather have your public officials indebted to, companies that have or will have business before the local govern-

ment - and will pass the cost of campaign donations on to the consumer anyway - or all of us?

A vigorous public-financing program will serve to make politicians "responsible to the constituent and not big-money interests," observes Pam Clough, who heads Fair Elections Maryland, an initiative of Maryland PIRG, Common Cause Maryland and Progressive Maryland working to establish small-donor empowerment programs.

Those who would squawk about the taxpayer footing the bill for some candidate's yard signs ought to consider the cost of the status quo. Right now, candidates don't have a prayer - indeed, are not considered "serious" - unless they go after many donations of \$500, \$1,000 and \$2,000, whether they want to or not. While those donations don't necessarily come with strings attached, they come with a lot of karma.

At the federal and state levels, the big donors command access and attention that Joe Voter can only dream of, fomenting a climate of apathy and cynicism. Local politicians, with their relatively small constituency, still have to engage the public in meaningful ways on an everyday basis. But, the way things are now, they also must go hat in hand to moneyed interests.

As campaigns get more expensive, it can only get worse. The culture of commercial politics grows like a fungus as representative democracy withers.

Although we may quibble about the cost or the manner in which the work is done, all of us recognize the necessity of maintaining infrastructure. If we don't keep up our roads, sewer pipes, power lines and such, we suffer in the long run. Think of public funding of political campaigns as democracy maintenance.

Doug Miller is a freelance writer and voiceover artist.