

Citizen-funded campaigns garners support

BY FATIMAH WASEEM
fwaseem@baltsun.com

Howard County's proposed small donor matching program took center stage at the County Council's public hearing Tuesday night, as more than four dozen supporters spoke for an opt-in program some said would amplify citizen voices in the face of big money in politics.

Wearing neon yellow stickers that read "Yes on CR-27," supporters of the program said matching funds would empower citizens, increase voter efficacy and participation in the public system and level the playing field for candidates.

Proposed by Council members **Jon Weinstein** and Jen Terrasa, the resolution would create a citizen-funded campaign system that matches small campaign donations using public funds. If passed by a Council vote on March 7, the measure would head to ballots in November and take effect for the 2022 election cycle. The details of the program would

be hammered into legislation after the decision in November.

Pushed by the Supreme Court's Citizens United decision in 2010, which ignited a national conversation about the power of money in politics, publicly funded campaigns have picked up steam across the country. Joining nearly two dozen states, Maryland lawmakers created an option for a publicly funded system in the campaign finance bill of 2013.

In 2014, Montgomery County became the first county to adopt a small donor matching funds program, which will be implemented in the 2018 election cycle. Before the program passed, the legislation under went 19 revisions.

Under the proposal, an independent commission would make funding recommendations for the program to the county executive and council.

The program would cost roughly \$3 million over four years, according to an estimate by Common Cause. The esti-

mate is based on a "fully utilized program" that covers two executive candidates and three candidates per council seat, said Jennifer Bevan-Dangel, executive director of Common Cause Maryland.

In Howard County, public contributions could be capped at \$750,000 for county executive candidates — like Montgomery County — and \$75,000 for council candidates, according to recommendations by Common Cause.

Bevan-Dangel urged the council to not wait for "corruption to weed itself into the council" before acting. Emily Scarr, director of Maryland PIRG, a consumer group, echoed her statements, saying the program is a "preventative measure" that should be taken seriously "no matter how acute it is."

The hearing briefly became heated when Register of Wills Byron Macfarlane said the county's campaign system has "failed us," citing roughly \$572,000 raised by Republican Howard County

Executive Allan Kittleman as of January this year. "The status quo is not acceptable," he said.

Councilman Greg Fox, the lone Republican on the council, challenged Macfarlane's approach, saying, "You have really shown your partisanship and that is what is wrong here." Fox referenced Weinstein's fundraising as an example of other public officials with significant fundraising.

Fox expressed concerns about how the program would be funded, asking whether the program's name, "publicly funded campaigns," indicated its funding source would be from donations or county funds.

Susan Geckel, a Sykesville resident, applauded Council members Terrasa and Weinstein for introducing the measure.

"As a voter, my voice will most likely be heard," she said, adding potential candidates interested in public service are "intimidated" by fundraising impediments.