

Public funding for county campaigns proposed

'Citizen funded' system would require voter OK

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Two Howard County Council members proposed a new publicly funded campaign system Monday that matches small campaign donations using public funds.

Proposed by council members **Jon Weinstein** and Jen Terrasa, the resolution — called a “citizen funded campaign system” — is a major change to the county’s charter. If the council passes the resolution in the beginning of March, the amendment will head to voters this year and, if approved, take effect for the 2022 election cycle.

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.

“We want to engage citizens more in the process so they feel like they can wield

influence, increase their voice and enhance it,” said Weinstein, who has accepted donations from corporations and political action committees. “That is how the system is now. And we can have an alternative.”

“We are joining a national conversation on the influence of money in politics,” said Terrasa. “We have to preserve our democracy.”

Amid promises that publicly funded campaign systems can squeeze private money out of politics, the consensus among experts is mixed, at best.

In September 2014, Montgomery became the first county in Maryland to opt-in to the system. Howard County’s system will likely be modeled after Montgomery County’s, which will be effective in the 2018 election cycle, said Weinstein. The county is working on details about the maximum contributions allowed, qualifications to access public funding and other requirements, he said.

A preliminary estimate indicates a four-year election cycle may require up to \$2 million in public funds, assuming many candidates opt-in to the voluntary system, Weinstein said. Studies to determine costs of the system are in progress, he said.

To qualify for matching funds in Montgomery County, candidates for

county executive must secure \$40,000 with a minimum of 500 donations; candidates for at-large county council positions must secure at least \$20,000 with a minimum of 250 donations; and candidates for district council seats must secure \$10,000 with a minimum of 125 donations. Candidates who opt-in cannot accept money from corporations or PACs.

In Montgomery County, public contributions are capped at \$750,000 for county executive candidates, \$500,000 for at-large council candidates and \$125,000 for district council candidates. The matching system is based on a tiered formula.

The Howard resolution creates a Commission on Citizen Funded Campaigns, which would include five county residents appointed by the council and two county residents appointed by the county executive. The commission would calculate estimated costs to fund the citizen funded campaign citizen budget, the resolution states.

On a national scale, proponents of publicly funded campaigns say matching funds increase competition among candidates. However, studies show incumbents almost always have an advantage, said Candice Nelson, a government professor at American University.

“There are too many factors at play in elections,” she said.

The price tag of publicly funded campaigns is a source of concern, said Wendy Underhill, a program manager for elections policy with the National Conference of State Legislatures, a bipartisan non-governmental organization.

“Proponents will suggest that having funds makes it more possible for competitive races to be run. It is tricky to keep up with the costs of campaigning,” said Underhill. “The impact of [matching funds] is sometimes in the eye of the beholder.”

David Keating, president of the Center for Competitive Politics, questioned the use of public funds for campaigning.

“Taxpayers wind up giving funds to a candidate they do not prefer,” said Keating. “Basically, it’s a subsidy for running campaigns.”

Weinstein says the system is an investment in Howard County’s democratic process.

“The commission will have the opportunity to adjust the cost of the system on an annual basis to reflect the number of candidates who qualify for the system,” he said. “Ultimately, the voters will decide if they want this.”