

Minutes (Approved)
Citizens' Election Fund Commission Meeting
Tuesday, December 6, 2022
6:00 p.m.
Via Webex and live-streamed

Chair Geckle called the meeting to order at 6:02 pm.

Attendees

Commission Members – Suzanne Geckle (Chair), Douglas Miller (Vice-Chair), Nadine Bernard, Ralph Frith, Keith Ohlinger, and Ginna Rodriguez-Panqueva

Council Members - Chair Christiana Rigby, Vice-Chair Deb Jung, and Liz Walsh

Commission Staff – Kristen Perry, Deputy County Solicitor, Amanda Mihill, Senior Assistant County Solicitor, and Brenna Punte-Pinos, Department of Finance

Council Staff – Lynne Blume Rosen, Senior Legislative Analyst

Department of Finance Staff – Rafiu Ighile, Brook Mamo, and Angela Price

The Commission approved the September 6, 2022 meeting minutes.

The Commission voted to meet again in person on June 21, 2023 at 6:00 p.m.

Council Member Walsh provided feedback on her experience as a candidate participating in the Citizens' Election Fund (CEF) program, including the importance of the program and its impact on Howard County citizens. She discussed the merits of the summary guide, recommended that in the future candidates receive all the paperwork earlier in the process so that they can review the paperwork in its entirety and understand in advance the information that is required to be filed, and reviewed the need to clarify program guidelines and provide additional guidance regarding the return of unspent campaign funds.

Council Member Rigby identified three areas of feedback: 1) retaining a small amount of funds after the election, similar to how Montgomery County recently updated its law; 2) procedural changes that would make the system more accessible and easier for campaign treasurers to use; and 3) the timing of when candidates receive matching funds.

Chair Geckle discussed that Montgomery County has approached the Commission regarding the sharing of software and the possibility of public financing of software when Prince George's County and Baltimore City establish a CEF program.

Mr. Ohlinger suggested that the Council have a work session to review CEF program issues that need to be fixed.

Council Member Rigby discussed the possibility of a Council monthly meeting or a separate meeting to review these issues.

Ms. Joan Pontius expressed her gratitude as a first-time candidate for the Citizens' Election Fund program. She discussed concerns with the timing of the receipt of funds, that a candidate should be able

to receive funds in an uncontested election, and the need to clarify rules regarding communication with supporters.

Vice-chair Miller discussed the need for conversation with the Howard County Delegation to the General Assembly to resolve some of the issues being discussed.

Council Member Jung expressed her gratitude for the Citizens' Election Fund and the support of the Commission staff in receiving her funds. She reviewed the challenges she experienced in receiving the funds. Council Member Jung discussed the issue of candidates setting up political committees but not filing as an actual candidate to keep CEF candidates from having access to CEF funds. She noted that Council Members Walsh and Rigby and Ms. Pontius addressed the mechanics of the program that need attention.

Mr. Ben Bialek, Campaign Treasurer, discussed issues concerning the wrapping up of Council Member Jung's campaign account, including expected invoices. He reviewed the need to retain a small amount of funding for a certain amount of time to defray various campaign costs. Mr. Bialek praised the assistance provided by Jared DeMarinis, Director, Division of Candidacy & Campaign Finance, Maryland State Board of Elections. He discussed the need for: 1) additional capacity at the State level for assistance as more counties establish CEF programs; 2) more transparency regarding the electronic transmission of funds; 3) addressing the backlog in the receipt of funds; and 4) clarification of the rules for communication for CEF candidates. Mr. Bialek discussed the goal that county CEF programs be consistent and the need for a Statewide perspective. Mr. Bialek thanked the Commission members for their work.

Mr. Phil Nichols expressed his gratitude for Commission assistance throughout the program and discussed that first time candidates need more assistance before certification. Mr. Nichols reviewed issues relating to the Maryland Campaign Reporting Information System (CRIS) and the need for improved uniform software. There is a need for clarification of other rules, including campaign literature and payment for tickets to fund raisers.

Chair Geckle discussed pursuing a work session with the Council in the future.

Mr. Ohlinger and Council Member Jung discussed the possibility of amending the County Code provision that requires a participating candidate to return to the fund any unspent money by December 31 after the general election.

Ms. Perry and Ms. Mihill discussed the need to review local and State law before providing a response concerning the December 31 date.

Chair Geckle reviewed the current CEF balance of approximately \$1 million, and the need to determine the amount of money anticipated for the next election cycle and divide the total amount among four fiscal years to make a budget recommendation. She anticipates planning for two county executive candidates and five county council candidates for the next election cycle, in addition to planning for new software. She reviewed a \$2 million budget over a four-year period. There is currently \$1 million. The CEF program needs an additional \$1million over the next four years, which is a \$250,000 balance for each of the next four years.

The Commission members discussed the need to factor into the budget the cost of new software, an amount that is unknown at this time.

Mr. Mammo discussed that the budget goes to the Council on April 18. The Commission budget recommendation is needed towards the end of February.

Mr. Ighile discussed the difficulty of projecting future budget needs depending on who chooses to use the CEF and which contests will be contested.

The Commission members discussed various budget amounts to request.

Chair Geckle discussed the option to increase the budget request in year 2, 3, or 4. She does not think that software cost information will be available during the current budget cycle. The Commission may have to wait until subsequent budget cycles to request funds to purchase software.

The Commission voted to request \$2 million for the next four-year election cycle and to request \$250,000 for the next fiscal year.

Mr. Mamo discussed that budget requests can be changed for future budget requests, if needed.

The Commission members discussed issues relating to the length of the current terms of office of Commission members. Ms. Perry and Ms. Mihill will review this issue and prepare a memorandum, in addition to the issue of the return of funds by December 31 after the general election.

Chair Geckle adjourned the meeting at 7:26pm.