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March 15, 2008

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## We'll bear campaign costs, whether bill passes or not

03/13/08

By Doug Miller

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Everybody understands that budgets are tight right now, but if a small expenditure now would save the taxpayer big bucks in the long run, you'd go ahead with it, wouldn't you?

The leadership in the Maryland Senate doesn't appear to have that kind of foresight, and would rather wait for a more convenient time to clean up a fundamentally flawed system of funding campaigns for the state legislature.

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The bill would implement public financing of campaigns for the General Assembly. Among the Senate heavies lined up against it is majority leader Edward Kasemeyer, whose district includes portions of Howard County, and whose own campaign boilerplate told a different story.

In 2006, Kasemeyer told the League of Women Voters in a reply to an election-year questionnaire, "I support the concept of providing public financing for campaigns and voluntary limits on campaign spending." But in the 2007 legislative session, Kasemeyer voted in the majority against a narrowly defeated public-financing bill. The same bill is before the legislature again this year, but Senate President Mike Miller -- who appointed Kasemeyer to his leadership position -- doesn't like it, and that often means no dice.

The measure -- sponsored by Prince George's County's Paul Pinsky, with cosponsors including Howard's James Robey -- would establish a \$7.5 million-a-year fund that would pay campaign costs for candidates for the state Senate and House of Delegates. The money would come from what the state makes selling off abandoned property and from one of those optional checkoff boxes on your state tax form.

To qualify to get campaign money from the state, a candidate would have to demonstrate his or her seriousness by accumulating contributions of at least \$5 each from 350 voters in his or her district and additional contributions totaling \$6,750, all within a period of about eight months.

Campaigns of participating candidates in a contested Senate seat would get a maximum of \$50,000 for primary and general elections. Contested House seats would merit \$20,000, \$35,000 or \$40,000, depending on whether the candidate is running in a single-delegate, two-delegate or three-delegate district. Those ceilings can be raised to match expenditures by non-participating opponents.

Candidates who participate in the program would be prohibited from spending or receiving private contributions during the primary or general election period.

Opponents of publicly financed campaigns like to call them a taxpayer-funded giveaway for politicians. But what would you call the current system, in which candidates for these offices rake in hundreds of thousands from industry and interest groups who are buying at least access, if not influence or even outright obedience?

Shouldn't the contributors the candidate is beholden to be the taxpayers instead of special interests who will pass their costs onto us anyway?

"Take slots, for example," remarked Sean Dobson, executive director of Progressive Maryland, which is lobbying in favor of the Pinsky bill. "Does anyone believe that issue would have sucked the oxygen out of the room for 10 years" had it not been for the effect of campaign contributions from a number of interest groups with a stake in it?

Dobson insists he isn't casting aspersions on the integrity of our representatives in Annapolis. "They're good people in a bad system."

With legislators still tearing their hair out over the budget, it's very plausible that they'll plead poverty in taking a pass on the Pinsky bill again.

But Dobson says his organization has expressed its willingness to delay implementation until the 2014 election cycle.

Since Kasemeyer didn't return my calls this week, I couldn't ask him whether that might assuage his misgivings.

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