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## Mythbusting

### **Our view: Voters don't care about the influence of big campaign donations? Lawmakers get reason to rethink that old canard and support public financing**

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The need for publicly financed campaigns for seats in the General Assembly has seldom been greater. With record sums likely to be spent on Senate and House of Delegates races next year, the influence of big donations on the legislature never more obvious, and some high-profile Maryland politicians under criminal investigation, one might assume support among legislators would be overwhelming.

But the chronically delusional are not so easily swayed. Public financing died late in the last legislative session through a combination of tactical error (a Senate bill that was fatally amended by opponents on the floor) and misconceptions over the proposal that may have muted support for reform.

The former is easy enough to correct, and today, public financing supporters will unveil their antidote to the latter: A statewide poll that shows Marylanders think big-money has a corrupting influence in Annapolis and that a major shake-up is the best solution.

Lawmakers would be wise to listen. For too many years, they've been telling themselves that voters don't care much about the issue and that people are more likely to raise a fuss at any attempt to spend taxpayer dollars on political campaigns - especially in the midst of a recession.

But the poll conducted by Gonzales Research & Marketing on behalf of Common Cause and Progressive Maryland found neither myth holds up on inspection. Three-quarters of Marylanders reportedly think big contributions have a corrupting influence, and even when reminded of the state budget deficit and recession, nearly two-thirds still support public financing.

That really should not come as any surprise. Not only is Baltimore's mayor being prosecuted on charges of failing to disclose thousands of dollars in gifts from a city developer, but one of the legislature's highest ranking Democrats, Senate Budget & Taxation Chairman Ulysses S. Currie of Prince George's County, remains under federal investigation for his actions on behalf of a supermarket chain.

High-profile decisions in which big-monied interests have had a stake - the deregulation of electricity and the legislation authorizing slot machines to mention just two from recent years - have added an urgency to the issue. It defies reason to assume voters would see nothing wrong with accepting millions of dollars from monied interests.

Legislation expected to be introduced once again in the next legislative session would at least send lawmakers on the path to redemption: A trial program for the 2014 election cycle that would allow qualified candidates for the House and Senate to accept up to \$100,000 in public money in lieu of private contributions.

It's a modest effort modeled after similar voluntary programs in Arizona, Maine and Connecticut and would be capped so that not all candidates would be eligible, only those who qualify on a first-come, first-served basis. That's not ideal, but it's a start.

Maryland may be facing budget deficits now, but the economic recession won't last forever. Taxpayers aren't stupid. They know keeping elected officials beholden to large corporations and special interests is a money-saver in the long run.

Like treating any addiction, separating politicians from big campaign donations won't be easy, but they may find the payoff worth the effort. The same poll revealed voters are more likely to re-elect those who vote for such major reform by a landslide.

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