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Survey pumps up finance reformers

Miller will hold back support until cost questions answered

by Alan Brody | Staff Writer

ANNAPOLIS — Campaign finance reform advocates, unbowed by the state's budget shortfall and emboldened by a new poll, plan to redouble their efforts next year to adopt a public financing law that gained more support in the 2009 General Assembly than any previous session.

However, Senate President Thomas V. Mike Miller (D-Dist. 27), a co-sponsor of the legislation this year, will not commit to supporting the bill in 2010 until it is drafted and questions about its cost are answered, aides said.

The dreary economy has exacerbated the concerns of other lawmakers about whether it's prudent to use taxpayer dollars to pay for a new program.

"In essence, this is coming out of education, health, environmental, public safety funding," said Sen. Robert A. Zirkin (D-Dist. 11) of Owings Mills, a leading critic of the bill. "Go ask the question, 'Would you rather pay for your politician's bumper sticker or your child's teacher?' and tell me the results of that poll."

But advocates pointed to the results of the poll conducted by Gonzales Research & Marketing Strategies showing a majority of Marylanders in favor of public campaign financing, even in tight budget times. The survey of 833 registered voters found 63 percent in support of the pilot program, which would begin in 2014, even in the midst of one of the worst recessions in years.

"The idea of taking money out of politics and fixing how politics works matters right now," said Ryan O'Donnell, executive director of Common Cause Maryland, one of two groups that commissioned the survey. He pointed to survey questions indicating the public's belief that large contributions buy influence, contribute to a perception of corruption and dissuade lawmakers from addressing issues like the budget shortfall, rising energy costs, health care reform and the Chesapeake Bay.

It's a noble goal, Zirkin said, but the proposed legislation would have done little to curtail the influence of special-interest groups and should not use any general tax revenues. He said other actions could address big money in politics.

The bill proposed using \$9 million in voluntary tax check-offs that would have first flowed through the general fund. In light of the state's budget woes, advocates are likely to scale back the pilot program to about \$5 million in an effort to reduce the price tag and could adjust the funding source, said Sean Dobson, executive director of Progressive Maryland, whose policy arm also commissioned the Gonzales poll.

The bill last year also included a provision that increased private contribution limits to \$4,400 per four-year campaign cycle. Advocates are open to keeping that in the bill next year if it helps maintain support, Dobson said.

Even though the pilot program wouldn't take effect until 2014, O'Donnell said passing the bill in an election year would send an important message to the public about how campaigns are financed.

"Statewide, faith in government is eroding, exactly at the time when we need it to stay intact the most," he said.

Legislators who support reform said Maryland should follow the lead of several other states that have embraced publicly financed campaigns.

"I think the public understands the way that money distorts public policy and we simply have to have the courage

to eliminate our dependence on corporate money," said Sen. Jamie B. Raskin (D-Dist. 20) of Silver Spring, who said he does not accept corporate contributions. "It's just a fallacy to think that corporations have any right to engage in politics at all."

Another supporter who took part in a conference call about the poll on Wednesday, Del. Jon S. Cardin (D-Dist. 11) of Owings Mills, doesn't plan to turn down corporate money until the next campaign cycle. But he doesn't see that as hypocritical, pointing to the recently passed ban on texting while driving. He said he was a big supporter of that legislation, but a frequent offender before it took effect this month. "I am happy now that I am forced to not do it," he added.

Dobson said his group doesn't penalize lawmakers who now accept special-interest money "because you can't ask them to fight with one hand tied behind their backs."

"Our point is not that the lawmakers are bad," he continued. "They're overwhelmingly good people involved in a bad system that influences you to take money to win the next election or climb up the leadership ladder."