

WHY ENVIRONMENTALISTS SHOULD SUPPORT “CLEAN ELECTIONS” PUBLIC FUNDING OF CAMPAIGNS

Over the past generation near continuous Democratic control of the General Assembly and Governor's office in Maryland has **not** resulted in aggressive enough state action to overcome the two biggest environmental challenges facing our state: sprawl and the related problem of an unhealthy Chesapeake Bay.

True, Maryland's talented environmental advocates succeeded in enacting pathbreaking Smart Growth legislation in the 1990s. But the Democratic General Assembly failed to fund it adequately and the brief yet destructive Ehrlich Administration cut funding even more. The bottom line? Sprawl continues to pave over our state [See www.friendsofmd.org] and the health of the bay has languished for decades at an unacceptably poor level, according to the Chesapeake Bay Foundation.

Given the Democrats' decades-long neglect of the environment, it seems highly unlikely they will suddenly reverse course just because a Democrat reclaimed the Governor's mansion in 2006. It seems much more likely they will continue their habit of paying lip service to the environment, at best passing laws that barely slow sprawl and the Bay's decline, not reverse them.

Why are these two most important environmental indicators getting worse in a state like Maryland, with its progressive electorate, powerful environmental movement and talented environmental advocates?

There are plenty of reasons. But by far the biggest is this: the enemies of the environment bankroll the careers of our elected officials. These corporate special interests financed Ehrlich's successful campaign for Governor: Of the \$11 million he raised in 2002, corporate interests donated approximately 92 percent. Overall in the 2006 election – which shattered the 2002 record in total campaign contributions by 69% - corporate special interests gave 22 times more in campaign contributions to candidates for state office than did non-profit organizations.

Guess whose voice is louder in Annapolis? Do you really think lawmakers in Annapolis – Democratic or Republican – will bite the hand that feeds them?

Towards a Solution: “Clean Elections” Public Funding of Campaigns

Public funding of campaigns changes this status quo, making it possible to pass laws to benefit all the voters, not just the energy companies, HMOs, and other special interests that fund the campaigns of elected officials. It is already law in Maine and Arizona, where it has worked well through three election cycles (Connecticut just enacted the reform in 2005 and will use it for the first time in the 2008 election).

Here's how it works:

- To participate, a candidate must demonstrate broad community support by collecting a large number of small contributions in the district he wishes to represent. For example, in Arizona, where Clean Elections is already law, candidates must collect several hundred \$5 contributions from voters in the district they wish to represent.
- If successful, the candidate receives enough money from the public Treasury to wage a competitive campaign.
- If a privately financed opponent outspends him, he receives offsetting funds to keep pace, up to a certain limit.

Advantages of Clean Elections:

- It enables citizens with community support but ordinary financial means to run for office.
 - It frees candidates and lawmakers from incessant fundraising, removing the appearance and reality of corruption.
- Participation in the publicly funded system is voluntary; by leaving the private campaign finance system alone, the Act is immune to judicial challenge.
- In Maine and Arizona, the number of candidates who participate in the system doubles with each election cycle. In 2006, a majority of candidates in both states financed their campaigns solely with public funds; both incumbents and challengers used the system; and participation cut across party lines.
- Member-rich organizations, such as environmental groups, benefit disproportionately from Clean Elections. That's because they can mobilize volunteers to help pro-environment candidates collect the \$5 contributions that qualify a candidate to participate in the system.
- Clean Elections candidates who win owe nothing to deep-pocket contributors, reducing the latter's privileged access in Annapolis. With lawmakers free from undue corporate influence, they are much more likely to support an environmental agenda.
- Maryland's Clean Elections system would cost less than \$1.30 per resident per year – a reasonable price to pay so that voters can take back control of politics from special interests and make public officials accountable. The system would be financed not with taxdollars, but instead with revenue from unclaimed property reverting to the state, such as abandoned vehicles and ownerless bank accounts.
- *Clean Elections reform has already been implemented in Maine and Arizona, where it is accomplishing all the benefits described above. That's why environmentalists in both states strongly support the law, including the Maine Sierra Club, Natural Resources Council of Maine, Arizona Sierra Club, Arizona League of Conservation Voters, Grand Canyon Trust, Sonora Trust, Nature Conservancy of Arizona, Center for Biological Diversity, and Don't Waste Arizona. Not a single environmental group in either state opposed enactment of this reform.*

In 2008, Environmentalists Have an Unprecedented Opportunity to Help Enact Public Funding of Campaigns in Maryland

In 2002, the General Assembly passed a bill to create an official task force to examine public funding of campaigns and make recommendations for Maryland. This distinguished, bipartisan study commission, whose members included several former and current lawmakers, recommended in favor of public funding of campaigns for General Assembly races. Sen. Paul Pinsky and Del. Jon Cardin are sponsoring legislation in the 2008 session of the General Assembly based on the study commission plan. This legislation comes at the perfect time to enact major reform:

- **The Special Interests Are Pumping More and More Money into Maryland Politics.** The banking industry, energy monopolies, and other special interests pumped \$94 million into Maryland's 2006 election -- a 69% increase over the 2002 election. Only 2.7% of Marylanders gave a contribution of any kind; corporate entities gave 22 times more than non-profit entities; and the average size of contributions increased dramatically.
- **Strong Support Statewide for Public Funding of Campaigns.** An October 2007 statewide poll shows 72% of Marylanders support Arizona-style public funding of campaigns. The Sierra Club, League of Conservation Voters, Progressive Maryland, the League of Women Voters, Maryland Association of Nonprofits, Common Cause, NAACP, AFL-CIO, NOW, and other organizations endorse the bill. The *Washington Post* and *Baltimore Sun* both support public funding of campaigns. The House of Delegates passed this legislation in 2006; but it fell just one vote short of passage on the Senate floor in 2007. We are very close to passing this bill.
- **Fiscally Responsible.** The modest, \$8 million approximate annual cost of the system would be financed not with taxdollars, but instead mainly from revenue from the sale of unclaimed property that reverts to the state each year, such as abandoned vehicles and ownerless bank accounts. Moreover, once in place, the system will save taxpayer dollars. That's because once lawmakers no longer owe favors to deep-pocket contributors, there will be less incentive to reward special interests with tax loophole, porkbarrel spending, and multibillion giveaways such as electricity deregulation.
- **Public Funding is Incumbent-Friendly.** As incumbent lawmakers learn how the system works in Maine and Arizona (and now also Connecticut), they understand that this reform is in their self-interest. That's why more and more say they will vote for the Pinsky/Cardin bill. Already in Maine and Arizona, almost half of incumbents use the publicly funded system. And in both states 90% of incumbents still win re-election (as they do in Maryland). Why? Because incumbents enjoy plenty of other advantages over challengers besides a fundraising edge. They have superior name-recognition, more contacts among activists, better campaign skills, more experience, a proven track record, etc. Incumbents in both states like the system because it eliminates the worst aspect of their job (fundraising) and frees them after the election to vote their conscience (not as contributors and corporate lobbyists demand). That's why incumbents in Connecticut voted overwhelmingly in 2005 to enact this reform into law.

In the long run, the Pinsky-Cardin bill could do for the environment what the Thornton commission did for public schools. The growing movement in Maryland to bring Clean Elections to our state includes the Sierra Club, League of Conservation Voters, Progressive Maryland, Maryland Association of Nonprofits, and many other groups. ###