

Maryland PIRG

Maryland Public Interest Research Group

Council President Katz

Testimony: Bill 31-20, Public Campaign Financing - Amendments

Position: SUPPORT

Tuesday, September 15, 2020

Maryland PIRG is a state based, small donor funded public interest advocacy organization with grassroots members across the state including a strong presence in Montgomery County. For forty-five years we've stood up to powerful interests whenever they threaten our health and safety, our financial security, or our right to fully participate in our democratic society.

We congratulate and thank the Council and your predecessors for your leadership in supporting campaign finance reform by spearheading a county level small donor incentive program and for successfully implementing the program in 2018.

In 2019, [Maryland PIRG Foundation released an analysis on the effectiveness of the 2018 program](#), finding that the program was largely successful in reaching its stated goals of encouraging greater participation, reducing the influence of large donors, and enabling more residents to be able to run for public office. We were particularly pleased to find that participation in the program was robust, and qualifying candidates:

- Received nearly twice as many donations from County residents than non-participating candidates.
- Received an average contribution of \$86 compared to \$1,145 for non-participating candidates.

As you likely know, Baltimore City, Howard County, and Prince George's County have now also established their own small donor public financing campaigns, and Baltimore County voters will vote to authorize a program on their 2020 ballot..

When the program passed in 2014, we urged the Council to be ready to expand and improve on the program each cycle, and we are glad to see you doing so with thoughtfulness and caution. Maryland PIRG is comfortable with the amendments you are considering to the program today. Specifically:

- We are pleased to see you are expanding the role and responsibility of the Committee to Recommend Funding for the Public Election Fund to increase public education and engagement and to ensure the committee is reflective of the County's diversity.
- While we prefer a limit of \$100 or \$150 for individual contributions, we understand that allowing for either a "double dip" with primary donors or increasing the limit to \$250 are acceptable approaches to ensuring candidates can remain competitive with traditionally funded candidates during competitive primary and general election cycles.
- Conducting an audit of the program is a wise course of action, particularly because of the use of public funds. However, if such a requirement doesn't also exist for traditionally funded candidates, we would recommend you add it. Candidates for the public election fund are under intense scrutiny, and we would be remiss not to suggest that if we are increasing oversight on campaigns that it would also apply to traditionally funded candidates.

Thank you for your service to Montgomery County.

[Emily Scarr](#), Maryland PIRG Director @[emilyscarr](#) @[marylandpirg](#)