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WHY THE EASTERN SHORE SHOULD SUPPORT CLEAN ELECTIONS PUBLIC FUNDING OF CAMPAIGNS

A bill to limit telemarketers from interrupting the dinnertime hour dies in committee. Legislation to prohibit police from requiring rape victims to undergo a humiliating polygraph exam dies in committee. Meanwhile, tax breaks for millionaires, country clubs, even purchasers of gold bullion become law.

Why do commonsense bills to benefit regular folks die in the Maryland General Assembly while special-interest bills pass?

Special interests pumped $75 million into Maryland's 2002 elections – double what they spent in 1998. This accelerating campaign inflation rate enables those who have money – the rich and special interests – to exercise more power than ever in deciding who gets elected in Maryland.

These same moneyed interests enjoy privileged access **after** the election because lawmakers, in effect, owe their jobs to them.

The vast majority of Marylanders can't afford to play this game. Less than 1% of Marylanders give a campaign contribution of any kind. Among interest group donations, business contributions account for 87 percent of the total.

The current campaign finance system especially hurts the Eastern Shore. In the 2002 election, the average per capita campaign contribution for residents of the Eastern Shore was $2.15; whereas the average per capita contribution for all Marylanders was $6.64. If money acts as a megaphone in Annapolis, the current money-driven system helps drown out the voice of the Eastern Shore in the General Assembly.

No wonder 75% of Marylanders believe that fund raising is a major source of corruption in state government, according to a University of Maryland poll.

Most lawmakers, too, don't like the current system. They spend more and more time fundraising. And, to remain competitive, they feel obliged to accept money from interest groups whose agenda they might not support.

But there is a solution. A blue-ribbon, state study commission spent two years looking at successful reform models in other states and issued its recommendation for fundamental reform. That recommendation is the basis of legislation sponsored by Sen. Paul Pinsky and Del. Jon Cardin. The bill would create a voluntary, publicly funded way to run for General Assembly, so that candidates need not take a single penny of special interest money when running for office.

Here's how the bill works:

- To participate in the publicly funded system, a candidate must demonstrate broad community support by collecting several hundred small contributions ($5 or more) in the district he wishes to represent.
- If successful, a House candidate can receive up to $80,000 and a Senate candidate up to $100,000 from the public Treasury to wage a competitive campaign.
- In exchange for the public funding, he agrees to take no private, special-interest contributions.
- If a privately financed opponent outspends him, he receives offsetting funds to keep pace, up to a certain limit.

A proven reform that works. In Maine and Arizona, where the system has been used through several election cycles, more than half of all candidates use the system, including nearly half of incumbents. The public in both states supports the reform, according to opinion polls. Republican and Democratic candidates support the system because it frees them from the endless money chase, allowing them to spend more time with voters. They also say it frees them to consider legislation on the merits -- without worrying about the demands of special-interest contributors. That's why lawmakers in Connecticut overwhelmingly enacted this reform into law in 2005.

Affordable. The Pinsky-Cardin reform would cost about $6.75 million per year. That's only 0.03 percent of the state budget, or about $1.30 per Marylander per year. That's a small price to pay for improved democracy. As implementation of the system would be delayed until the 2010 election cycle, this modest expense would kick in <u>after</u> the 2006 election – i.e., when the current budget deficit will be a distant memory. Moreover, the system could be financed not with tax-dollars, but instead by closing any number of special-interest tax loopholes.

Good for fiscal discipline. By severing the link between special-interest contributors and lawmakers, this reform would **<u>save</u>** state government money by reducing the incentive to lavish pork and tax loopholes on those who need it least. It's precisely this payola to donors that helped create the state's chronic $1 billion budget deficit.