

# THE CUMBERLAND TIMES-NEWS

## Campaign reform would improve democracy in Maryland

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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 and country clubs become law.

Why do common-sense 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.

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

The current system also hurts Western Maryland. The average per-capita campaign contribution for residents of Western Maryland was \$2.98; 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 Western Maryland in the General Assembly.

No wonder 75 percent of Marylanders believe that fundraising is a major source of corruption in state government, according to a recent University of Maryland poll.

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

But there is a solution. A state study commission spent the last two years looking at successful reform models in other states and just issued its recommendation for fundamental reform. That recommendation is the basis of legislation sponsored by Delegates John Hurson and Virginia Clagett as well as Sen. Paul Pinsky. The bill would create a voluntary, publicly funded way to run

for the General Assembly, so that candidates need not take a single penny of special interest money. Here's how the bill works:

To participate in the publicly funded system, a candidate must demonstrate broad community support by collecting a large number of 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 contributions.

If a privately financed opponent outspends him, he receives offsetting funds to keep pace, up to a certain limit.

In Maine and Arizona, where the system has been used through several election cycles, more than half of all candidates use it, including nearly half of incumbents. The public in both states supports the reform, according to opinion polls.

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.

By severing the link between special-interest contributors and lawmakers, this reform would save state funds 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 deficit. New campaign finance scandals erupt almost weekly in Annapolis. The situation has gotten so bad that even the FBI is investigating the mess in our state capital. Lawmakers are considering the Hurson-Clagett-Pinsky bill right now. They should enact this proven reform to restore voter confidence in elected officials, to help Maryland climb out of its budget deficit, and to return government to the people.

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*Progressive Maryland ([www.progressivemaryland.org](http://www.progressivemaryland.org)) promotes the interests of low-income families in Maryland.*