

Daily News

THEIR OPINIONS

A clean-money law gives power to public

By Wendy Greuel, Bill Rosendahl and Eric Garcetti

WILL Rogers famously remarked, "Politics has become so expensive that it takes a lot of money even to be defeated."

Decades later, this still rings true: The cost of campaigns is so high that sincere individuals who aspire to be public servants must find enough deep-pocket private donors — many of them representatives of special interests — or they stand no chance of getting elected. Honest elected officials must do the same, or they will soon find themselves ex-public servants.

Special-interest money plays such a large a role in our political culture that most of us seem resigned to its presence in politics. We forget that democracy need not depend on the flow of private special-interest money. We forget that we can fight its influence.

But we can. This week, the City Council unanimously supported our proposal to design a full public-financing option that can drive special-interest money out of local politics.

As elected officials, we continually strive to connect to, and communicate with, the communities we represent. But no matter how vigorously we attack the problems in our neighborhoods, an inescapable force pulls us in another direction. Political fundraising takes us out of our districts, sometimes even out of our city.

Deep potholes must compete with deep pockets for our attention. And the universe of campaign money intersects too closely with the worlds of lobbyists, developers and commissioners, fueling suspicions of influence-peddling and creating the appearance of a political class that has greater access and power than ordinary citizens.

Special-interest money has privatized our democracy. It contributes to the apathy and disgust of an electorate that increasingly chooses not to participate in what it perceives as a corrupt political process.

We must open the door to a greater pool of candidates and to greater civic participation. By matching privatized campaigns with public dollars, public financing neutralizes the effect of independent expenditures. By requiring a large number of small donations at the beginning of the campaign, public financing forces candidates to hang up the phone with fundraisers and go out in the community to ask constituents for a modest commitment.

Our proposal, which will return for council approval in three months, does not ban political giving. It allows candidates to opt in to a system that will provide them with the amount of money necessary to run a campaign if they will voluntarily refuse to accept private campaign contributions.

States like Vermont, Arizona and Maine have all adopted variations on this system, and its simple elegance has transformed politics in those states. In Arizona, 59 percent of all state candidates in 2004 chose public financing. In Maine, voter turnout increased by 5 percent in four years of a public-financing option, and today, 77 percent of the members of the Maine state Senate were elected under Maine's Clean Money Law.

Imagine what candidates could learn by walking door to door in their council districts to ask 300 people for \$5 each in order to demonstrate the base of support needed to qualify for public financing.

Under public financing, the same groups that today lobby elected officials will have to compete on the strength of their ideas, not their wallets and war chests. Small-business owners will be free from doubts that they would have more access if they had bought a ticket to the right fundraising event. Elected officials will be able to spend much more time serving the needs of their communities when they can put down the phone with fundraisers. And politics will return to the people.

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LOCAL VIEW