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Duncan Cries Foul On Bill

Fundraising Limits Applied Unevenly

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Montgomery County Executive Douglas M. Duncan (D) has been lobbying aggressively to block passage of a bill in Annapolis that would allow the Montgomery County Council to strengthen campaign finance laws for all local candidates.

The measure was filed at least partly in response to Duncan's unprecedented use of campaign cash last year to exert political muscle in local races, enabling him to defeat several council incumbents who opposed his pro-road and development goals.

"We're only now starting to learn what interests were pouring money into last year's elections," said council member Phil Andrews (D-Gaithersburg), who was one target of Duncan's campaign effort and is now a strong supporter of the legislation. "The last election demonstrated many of the problems, and this bill lets us start looking at solutions."

Duncan has said he is not averse, in concept, to campaign finance reform. But he opposes applying restrictions to Montgomery County politicians that won't apply to candidates elsewhere in the state.

Those regulations could one day apply to Duncan. He has made no secret of his interest in running for governor in 2006, and in calls to lawmakers over the past three weeks, he and his aides have emphasized that point.

House Majority Leader Kumar P. Barve (D-Montgomery) said he has heard from the county executive and agrees with his concerns.

"I'm not interested in voting for any bill that would let the legislature hobble a Montgomery County candidate who wants to run for statewide office in the future," Barve said.

Montgomery County is not the only jurisdiction expressing interest in campaign finance reform. While the local bill awaits a final vote from the county's delegation in Annapolis, lawmakers from around the state have added to a stack of pending legislation addressing the role that money plays in electoral politics.

Among the proposals under consideration: one that would close a loophole allowing donors to contribute multiple times by writing checks from separate business accounts; a measure forcing candidates to identify a contributor's employer on state campaign contribution reports, as federal candidates must do; and one that would eliminate the use of candidate slates, an increasingly common tactic that lets candidates move money more fluidly between accounts.

Another measure, modeled after similar laws in New Jersey and Louisiana, would prohibit direct and indirect donations from gambling interests. It comes as reports show that parties with interest in the legalization of slot machine gambling have poured more than \$1 million into committees used to fund state races.

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For reform advocates, this appears to be a ripe moment to make substantial changes to the state's election laws. The candidates in last year's race for governor raised more than \$20 million combined, making it the most expensive in state history. A University of Maryland survey released last week showed many Marylanders are worried that big donations are buying undue influence in Annapolis.

And the Democrat-controlled General Assembly has an incentive to make changes that it has not had in more than 30 years: a Republican governor with a proven ability to raise cash.

"It's time we begin to make reforms," said Del. Ana Sol Gutierrez (D-Montgomery). "I don't want to play the same corrupt game that's been going on for years."

Not all the bills, however, are aimed at making it more difficult for money to enter the political process.

There is also a bipartisan push to increase the amount of money that contributors can donate. In the House yesterday, Minority Leader Alfred W. Redmer Jr. (R-Baltimore) introduced legislation that would increase the aggregate contribution limit from \$10,000 to \$20,000. The measure has bipartisan support.

Redmer said the limits have not changed in years. He said that increasing them would help challengers defeat candidates because there would be more money to go around.

Del. Adrienne A. Mandel (D-Montgomery) said she believes that even if the rest of the state is not interested in tightening the rules, the Montgomery County Council should have the option of doing so locally.

Under a bill she sponsored, the council would be able to add new restrictions to candidates for council or county executive that extend beyond those required by the State Board of Elections, which oversees and enforces Maryland's campaign finance rules. The council voted 9 to 0 recently in support of the measure.

During a lengthy debate on the subject with her colleagues from Montgomery County on Thursday, many took Duncan's view, which is that the restrictions would harm local candidates for statewide office.

They said it could prevent Montgomery's politicians from exerting the same degree of influence as their counterparts in other counties. Last year, for instance, Duncan transferred money from his account to key legislators, such as House Appropriations Chairman Howard P. Rawlings (D-Baltimore) and House Environmental Matters Committee Chairman Maggie L. McIntosh (D-Baltimore).

Duncan's influence had its impact. In a 19 to 5 vote yesterday, the county's House delegation agreed to an amendment offered by Barve that would limit the scope of the measure. As amended, the County Council would be permitted to strengthen only campaign finance disclosure requirements. It could not tamper with donation limits or the formation of slates.

Even that, Andrews said, would be a victory, in his view.

"There's a real need for timely disclosure," he said. "There's a lot of money being spent, and the public should be able to know what the interests of those folks are before they vote."

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