

## Commissioner Perspective: *Creating Equity in Campaign Financing*

**By Jonathan Stein, PEC Commissioner**

The Commission is embarking on a project to review the City's current campaign financing system to determine what reforms would help reduce the influence of big money in politics and enhance citizen participation in the electoral process.



An analysis of campaign contributions in Oakland's 2014 and 2016 election cycles show a near-total dominance of high-dollar donors and significant disparities in political giving by zip code. **A stunning 93.2 percent of money contributed to candidates in Oakland from City residents came in checks over \$100, and came from just 0.93 percent of the City's residents.** Five zip codes – 94602, 94610, 94611, 94612, and 94618 – are responsible for 73 percent of all itemized contributions to City candidates in these two election cycles.

- Zip code 94612, including Downtown, Uptown, and neighborhoods bordering Lake Merritt, is home to less than 4 percent of Oakland's population but was responsible for over 24 percent of all political giving in the City (\$742,789).
- Zip code 94611, including Piedmont, Montclair, and some of the Oakland hills, is home to just 9 percent of Oakland's population but is home to 21 percent of all contributors over \$100 (763 people). By contrast, the similarly sized zip code 94603, in deep East Oakland, is home to less than 1 percent of all contributors over \$100 (28 people). All told, zip code 94611 gave 32 times the amount to City candidates as zip code 94603 did.
- Lastly, 30 percent of money contributed to Oakland candidates in these two election cycles came from donors living outside of the City of Oakland.

The fact that the donor class is non-representative of the public at large is a problem because political giving can provide access to and influence over politicians. Oakland attempts to address the problem of money in politics with two city ordinances.

1. First, the **Oakland Campaign Reform Act** attempts to limit the amount of spending on City campaigns by allowing candidates to raise donations in substantially larger amounts if they agree to limit their overall campaign spending.
2. Second, the **Limited Public Financing Act** attempts to lessen the fundraising burden on candidates and create more political competition by giving candidates public funding for their campaigns in the form of reimbursements for campaign spending, so long as they meet certain specified criteria.

In the coming months, the PEC's subcommittee on Campaign Finance will review these laws and Oakland's current needs to determine whether the current policies are meeting their objectives, and whether those objectives are the right ones for the City. Campaign financing systems in Los Angeles, San Francisco, and New York City known as "matching funds systems" and a new experiment in Seattle with something called "Democracy vouchers" give Oakland the opportunity to learn from other cities and possibly adopt a new and better approach. We can and should use our campaign finance law to democratize our democracy.

Email [EthicsCommission@oaklandnet.com](mailto:EthicsCommission@oaklandnet.com) to receive notice of our subcommittee work on this project and join our discussion. The subcommittee will present its recommendations and draft legislation to the full Commission upon the completion of its work.



Source: <http://www.wausaudailyherald.com/story/opinion/2014/07/16/money-politics-threatens-democracy/12747061/>; Syndicated by Cagle Cartoons.

\*Data for this article was provided by MapLight, a Berkeley-based nonprofit that aggregates and analyzes campaign contribution data from local jurisdictions.