

March 3, 2020

Testimony on HB 1565
Public Ethics and Campaign Activity - County Governing Bodies and County Executives - Planning and Zoning Applications
Environment and Transportation

Position: Favorable

Common Cause Maryland supports HB 1565, which would expand the existing restriction on donations to Prince George's County Executive and Councilmembers by those currently applying for certain zoning approvals, applying the same restrictions to all Maryland counties

Common Cause Maryland has analyzed spending on local campaigns around the state, and developers are consistently the interest group investing the most in these campaigns – because they have the most invested in the outcomes. And while campaign donations do not translate directly into votes, these donations help create relationships and a level of access that everyday voters do not enjoy.

Decisions made at the county level have a direct and unalterable impact on the strength of our communities. Loopholes in the law have long allowed certain interests, particularly developers, to use LLCs to circumvent campaign contribution limits, giving them unfettered access and influence with local elected officials. This has fostered an imbalance of power between citizens and developers.

Focusing on developer dollars at the County level makes sense – land use decisions are the most consistent policy our Councils make, second only to the county budget in importance. Developers have the most to gain or lose from the Council, and therefore the greatest incentive to play the game of campaign spending. Prince George's County recognized this when they passed their donation ban. The Baltimore County Council has also acknowledged this, having at times established a ban on donations during the actual zoning re-write. Building on those efforts with a more comprehensive statewide prohibition is the next step for reform.

We understand the challenges of raising money for local office and urge these counties to consider establishing a citizen election fund to give candidates the ability to raise money only from small donors and still run competitive campaigns. These programs, which have been created in Montgomery, Howard, and Prince George's Counties as well as Baltimore City, empower candidates to run campaigns fully funded by everyday voters.

HB 1565 would strengthen our ethics and campaign finance laws. We urge a favorable report.