

House Ways and Means Committee
HB 488 – Local Public Campaign Financing – Expansion to Additional Offices
Position: Favorable

Dear Chari Atterbeary, Vice-Chair Washington, and Members of the Committee:

I write as a Co-Chair of the Montgomery County chapter of Our Revolution Maryland. Along with Fair Elections Maryland, we have advocated expansion of public campaign financing since our founding. We have supported various incarnations of enabling legislation to allow counties to expand their systems to ever more local races. We believe strongly in public campaign financing as the simplest path to promote greater integrity in government and more public confidence in the system. Most crucially, it can empower the types of candidates who have been unable to compete in privately financed elections because they lack the resources or connections to raise the money needed to be taken seriously and to reach voters.

In Montgomery County, we have already come through one cycle with public financing of our County Council and County Executive races. That system was eye-opening, working beyond our greatest expectations. Almost 3 dozen candidates filed to run for 4 At-Large seats. Many of them sought public financing, knowing it was the only path to raising enough money to run county-wide in a county with over a million people. There were also multiple district level candidates who ran seeking to qualify for the public fund.

Many of the candidates who sought public funds failed to raise enough from local donors to qualify. Those who received public dollars were suddenly competing in rarefied air and were able to obtain donations from more than twice as many donors, on average, as those who ran with 'traditional' financing. All four winners in the At-Large race ran on public matching dollars. The winner of the primary for County Executive owed much of his success to a combination of impressive grassroots fundraising and the considerable matching dollars afforded to County Executive candidates. Our now County Executive narrowly defeated a multi-millionaire candidate who self-financed his campaign with five times the funds, a gap which would have been an insurmountable chasm without the public matching.

As voter participation increased by 40% over the 2014 primary, it's clear that voter engagement was spurred by the program at least as much as candidates were empowered by the public matching. It is not a cure-all for all the ills of our electoral system and doesn't fully eliminate the influence of well-heeled donors and corporate interests. Still, it seems clear that it pumped much-needed oxygen into a democracy that was being choked by a flood of big donor cash.

Too many of our elections are still fenced off from public financing. Voters suffer as much as candidates. Board of Elections races are county-wide. It takes tens of thousands of dollars to pay for the barest mailer and voter outreach programs needed to contact the potential hundreds of thousands of primary voters even one time, far more than the job pays the winner. Other consequential county-wide races include the judges, State's Attorney, and Sheriff.

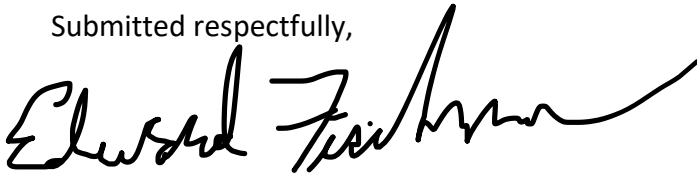
Residents filling out their ballots often know nothing about the candidates in these races. This is poison for a functioning electoral democracy. It drives much of the citizen disengagement, as well as a perception the system serves only the interests of the wealthy and biggest businesses. Perhaps worse, it feeds fires of extremism that now burn behind the veil of ignorance through which most voters view our political system. It's become even more important for Maryland to move forward as a proof-of-concept of the potential of publicly-financed campaigns.

Our delegation has voted before, unanimously, to expand the system to the Board of Elections races. It would be the barest nod to democracy to pass enabling legislation for Montgomery County to expand the scope of public financing for our campaigns. It would also be a loss of a great opportunity for other voters across the state. We can already see that the system brings more candidates into the process and raises the level of voter engagement.

There is no reason to wait for further study as several other counties are implementing their own public financing systems in this cycle or next, to the limited number of races for which Maryland law has authorized the counties to do. The voters in those counties will soon wonder why we do not offer public funding for candidates in other races. This committee and this House should provide the answer that our state representatives are now making it possible for counties to implement in the next cycle.

We ask for a favorable report.

Submitted respectfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Edward Fischman". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke at the end.

Edward Fischman
Co-Chair, Our Revolution Montgomery County.