

"Federation Corner" column
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Pending election reform legislation in Annapolis

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The MCCF has testified on 3 electoral reform bills and urge you call or write your state delegates and senators to lobby as indicated below.

Senate Bill (SB) 561 and House Bill (HB) 648 is a state constitutional amendment that would allow the counties to raise the signature requirement for charter amendments. In Montgomery County's case, if approved, this could raise the number of valid signatures from 10,000 (the current minimum) to between 26,000 and 104,000 based on current voter registration.

MCCF's testimony as the following: "MCCF opposes SB 561 and HB 648. This is an inappropriate statewide "solution" for a perceived Montgomery County problem. Voters in Baltimore City and charter counties around the state should not have their ability to petition a charter amendment to the ballot curtailed because Montgomery County citizens have successfully exercised the right."

"The current powers in Montgomery County wish to silence all opposition by raising the charter amendment petition signature threshold so high that no citizen group could ever effectively meet it. They are attempting to stop one individual who has been particularly effective in getting questions onto the ballot with statewide legislation."

"Advocates of this legislation say that getting 10,000 valid signatures is too easy. From recent experience, the MCCF members can attest that there is nothing easy about getting that many signatures. It's really 12,000 signatures collected one at a time to get 10,000 valid ones. It takes 20,000 or more intrusive "Excuse me, are you a registered voter in Montgomery County?" 15,000 explanations of the proposed change and then a request from a stranger that they legibly print their name, full address, date of birth, current date and finally their signature. In this day of voter apathy, if a responsible civic organization can organize the effort to do all of that, they deserve to have a question on the ballot. The effect of raising the requirement will be to have no public sponsored charter amendment."

Senate bill (SB) 461 and House bill (HB) 566 once again attempt to close the multiple corporation, multiple contribution loophole.

MCCF's testimony: "The Montgomery County Civic Federation (MCCF*) supports SB 461 and HB 566. Corporations, wholly-owned subsidiaries, partnerships and 80% common ownership LLCs, LLPs, and REITs should be considered as one entity for purposes of campaign contribution limitations."

"Everyone is entitled to support the candidate of their choice and to give voice to that support by contributing to a campaign. But we put limits on the amount of money one can contribute so that no one's voice is drowned out. Because state law allows business entities to contribute to campaigns, they are subject to the same limitations that individuals are. For a variety of reason, many new business endeavors are spun off as separate entities but remain under the control of the parent organization. The consequence of this new business model is an explosion of business entities. Each 'child' in the business family has a new contribution limit. In effect, there is no contribution limit on businesses."

"Because of the diligent research by Neighbors for a Better Montgomery, (see www.NeighborsPAC.org), you can see clearly see the problem. In the attached chart titled "F.O.Day Interests Contributions for 2002

Election Cycle", note the coordinated effort of the multiple related business entities each giving \$700 to the same Montgomery County Council candidates, \$4000 to Douglas Duncan and \$4000 to Bob Ehrlich. The practice has continued in the 2006 cycle. You can change the rules. Modify the law to change it back to its original intent."

MCCF supports SB 725 and HB 1031 - Public Funding Act for Candidates for the General Assembly. We continue to support campaign finance reforms, but our membership, overwhelmingly believes that voluntary public financing of election campaigns is the best solution.

MCCF's testimony: "Why do we need it? A survey sponsored by the Stenberg Commission found that 94% of the respondents thought that campaign contributions influence the policies supported by state elected officials. The study also found that 75% believe that fundraising is a major source of political corruption. Unfortunately, all state legislators are unfairly tainted by the perception that their votes are bought and paid for by influential special interest contributors. Public financing of campaigns removes the source of the potentially real, and certainly perceived, problem of influence peddling."

"Participating candidates are not beholden to any large contributor. The candidates can spend the entire time meeting voters and campaigning on issues instead of fundraising. Citizens get few fundraising solicitations and more discussion of issues. There is a more opportunity for candidates from every ethnic, racial, social, financial and professional background to get involved. The MCCF applauds all who chose to run for public office. We believe the opportunity to serve the public should be open to all citizens, not just to those who can raise huge sums of money."

"The worst part of campaigning is raising money. Promoting, hopefully not politically compromising, oneself for money is at best unpleasant. If a candidate's base constituency is lower income, then it may be impossible to financially compete. If a person can demonstrate broad based support by collecting a large number of modest \$5-\$20 qualifying contributions, then she/he should be able to run."

"Incumbents still have an advantage because of name recognition and opportunity for media exposure, but not an advantage in financial contributions. Incumbents, who participated, can run on their record but cannot be accused of being influenced by large campaign contributors."

"One or two dollars a year is not too much to restore faith and confidence in our government. The system is entirely voluntary so it does not violate the first amendment free speech provision of the constitution. If a candidate does not participate, he/she is subject to current election law."