

Voter-Owned Elections in Olympia

Proposed by the Olympia chapter of Washington Public Campaigns, July 2008

Summary of Voter-Owned Elections in Olympia

1. How Candidates Qualify

- a. The voter-owned election program is voluntary. No candidate is required to participate.
- b. First, a candidate files a notice of intent to participate in the program, and signs a contract agreeing to abide by the rules of the program .
- c. Then, candidates must collect signatures and qualifying donations of \$10 (no more nor less, paid to the city) from at least 300 registered Olympia voters.
- d. The signatures and qualifying donations must be submitted to the city to be validated no later than 30 days after the candidate filing period.
- e. If the candidate fails to qualify, the qualifying donations are returned to the donors or placed in the city's public campaign account.
- f. To help them collect signatures and qualifying donations, candidates may accept private seed-money donations for their campaign, up to \$1,000 total, with no more than \$100 from any single donor, and only from Olympia residents.

2. Prohibition on Private Donations

- a. Once they qualify for the voter-owned election program, candidates may not accept any private campaign donations nor spend their own money for their campaign.
- b. There is an exception for small in-kind donations (such as food for events), which are allowed up to a value of \$300 total, with no more than \$50 from any single donor, and only from Olympia residents.
- c. Traditional volunteering is not a donation, and is allowed. However, providing free professional services that would normally be paid for (as defined in state campaign finance law) is a donation.

3. Amount of Funds for Candidates

- a. For the primary election, candidates receive \$6,000 in public funds. Seed-money donations are deducted from this, so each candidate will have the same \$6,000 total for their primary campaign.
- b. Candidates who advance to the general election receive another \$9,000 in public funds.
- c. In future years, these amounts will be adjusted for inflation.

4. “Fair Fight” Funds

- a. When an opposing candidate raises or spends more campaign money than is provided in public funds, candidates in the voter-owned election program receive fair fight funds equal to the excess amount raised by their opponent, up to a limit.
- b. Fair fight funds are limited to \$6,000 for the primary election, and \$9,000 for the general election (cumulative, for a total of up to \$15,000).
- c. A third-party independent expenditure made on behalf of an opposing candidate counts the same as if the opposing candidate spent the money, so this is also matched with fair fight funds.

5. Use of Public Funds

- a. Candidates may spend public funds for campaign purposes only (as defined by state campaign finance law).
- b. Candidates may not use public funds for private gain, nor pay or buy things from themselves, a relative, or their own business, nor give the funds to other candidates, ballot measure campaigns, or other organizations. (This requirement is more strict than state campaign finance law.)

6. Penalties for Misuse of Public Funds

- a. To knowingly use public funds for personal gain is a gross misdemeanor. The candidate must return all public funds (spent or unspent) to the city, plus 12% interest, plus a 20% administrative fee. The candidate may also face criminal penalties.
- b. An unintentional or minor violation of the voter-owned election rules is a civil infraction. The candidate must return the public funds involved and pay a small penalty. For unintentional first-time violations, the penalty is waived.
- c. If a candidate repeatedly violates the rules, or drops out of the race, then the candidate must return all public funds (spent or unspent) to the city, plus 12% interest, plus a 20% administrative fee.
- d. If the candidate must withdraw because of a personal emergency, or has money left over after the election, the candidate must return the unspent funds to the city, without penalty.

7. Public Records

- a. Candidates must still follow all campaign finance reporting requirements of the Washington State Public Disclosure Commission.
- b. Candidates must file the same state reports with the city, but more frequently than the state requires, to ensure that public money is being used properly.

- c. Privately-funded opposing candidates also must file reports with the city frequently, to ensure that fair fight funds are provided promptly.
- d. All voter-owned election information is public record, is subject to full public disclosure, and will be posted on the city website.

8. Overall Spending Cap

- a. The entire voter-owned election program will be limited to an overall spending cap of \$2.50 per Olympia resident per year.
- b. In future years, this amount will be adjusted for inflation.
- c. If it appears this limit may be reached, the city will hold in reserve enough public funds to ensure full funding for candidates in the general election.
- d. If this limit is reached, the available public funds will be distributed evenly to all qualified candidates.

For more information about Voter-Owned Elections in Olympia, or to get involved in this effort, please contact Monica Hoover, with the Olympia chapter of Washington Public Campaigns, at (360) 943-3070 or thurston@washclean.org or Laurie Davis at olyvoe@live.com