

Montgomery plan would allow county to set its own campaign finance rules

■ Plan passes committee, delegation votes next

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ANNAPOLIS — Montgomery County is one step closer to making its own campaign finance rules after preliminary approval by a delegation committee last week.

The legislation, sponsored by Del. Susan C. Lee, would allow the County Council to establish a system of public campaign financing, similar to the system used for presidential elections. The county law would also include rules on campaign contributions and expense, finance reports and campaign material. The law would also allow the council to set campaign spending limits.

Equally important, the system would be voluntary, leaving candidates to determine whether to adhere to the rules in order to receive public funding, or allowing them to raise and spend campaign contributions by traditional methods.

Lee and other lawmakers said the law is necessary to "level the playing field in the county."

"This bill would enable outstanding candidates, specifically women and minority candidates

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**Councilman Philip M. Andrews
(D-Dist. 3) of Gaithersburg**

as well as candidates without enormous financial resources, to run for office," said Lee (D-Dist. 16) of Bethesda.

A House committee of Montgomery lawmakers voted 7 to 1 in favor of the bill. A vote by the full county House delegation is scheduled this week. If approved, the bill would also have to be approved by the county's Senate delegation before being introduced in the legislature.

Councilman Philip M. Andrews (D-Dist. 3) of Gaithersburg has been pushing the legislation for the past few years.

"This is a local bill that Montgomery County really needs to address where the money would come from," said

Andrews, who would like to see the rules implemented for the 2010 election.

Although the bill has not passed yet, and the County Council has not devised the finance laws, Andrews said he would like to see candidate spending limits set in the range of \$100,000 to \$200,000 for county council seats and around \$1 million for county executive.

In previous elections, some Montgomery council candidates have spent about \$100,000 and executive candidates spent close to \$2 million.

Civic and political watchdog groups — including Progressive Maryland, Common Cause and the League of Women Voters — are supporting the legislation.

With the expense of county elections, "candidates tend to solicit large sums of money from those best able to provide it, the wealth and the special interest groups," said Dwight Cramer, Common Cause Maryland board member.

Del. Anne R. Kaiser, who cast the dissenting vote in the House delegation committee, said campaign finance issues are better handled on a broader level.

"Sometimes it's more comfortable for these things to be addressed statewide," said Kaiser (D-Dist. 14) of Burtonsville. "These policies should be equivalent across the state."