



On this tax day, check that box

Tuesday, April 15, 2008

In the fury of today's tax filing, the little check-box might be easy to miss.

It asks whether you, Maine taxpayer, will allocate \$3 to the Maine Clean Elections Fund. Saying yes neither raises your taxes nor reduces your refund. It is simply a vote for clean elections.

Of all the ways Mainers can ensure the quality of their government, supporting clean elections is perhaps the easiest. We urge filers to check this box; not only are clean elections needed, they need public support now, more than ever.

Clean elections funding of \$3.7 million this year has come under intense scrutiny. The program has escaped cuts, and received an IOU from the governor in his budget bill.

In mid-2009, the clean elections fund is promised \$4.4 million from the general fund for 2010 legislative and gubernatorial races. The amount is repayment for what's been taken from the clean elections fund since 2002.

It won't be enough. "Clean" legislative races in 2010 are estimated to cost \$4.9 million. The gubernatorial race, which will elect a new Blaine House occupant, is expected to cost \$5.8 million, if four candidates qualify for funding.

This has begged an obvious question: Are clean elections worth the price?

The Maine Commission on Governmental Ethics and Election Practices will hold a public hearing about this on June 27. The hearing is budget fallout; the commission was asked to review funding options for clean elections.

Some options are draconian: stop funding gubernatorial races altogether.

But there are strong arguments for clean elections funding as most crucial for governor races, and it is worth the expense. It makes little sense to revert to private funding and political machines as the price of vying for Maine's highest office.

While voters elected the only non-clean election candidate in 2006, the presence of three, strong publicly funded opponents made for an interesting, engaging and thoughtful campaign. Stronger competition, stronger leaders.

Other options are more sensible. Since the governor's race is less frequent, and more expensive, further toughening qualifications for public funds seems wise. Last year, the state raised the needed number of \$5 qualifying contributions from 2,500 to 3,250.

Four or five thousand would be appropriate. Gaining the contributions, after all, measures the seriousness and worthiness of a candidate. The bar should be low enough to reach, but high enough to dissuade the frivolous.

Legislative funding, in our opinion, should be untouched. Clean elections should elevate citizens into public office, not put it out of reach. These are discussions expected June 27, and in the subsequent ethics commission report.

Clean elections was a citizens' initiative, however, so any changes must be measured against the expressed will of the people. There's time ahead for input into this process. Right now, though, the public should do just one thing to support clean elections.

Check that box.