

## Concern Grows Over Viability of Maine Clean Election Fund

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**No publicly-financed candidate has ever been elected governor of Maine, but that hasn't discouraged the field of contestants vying for the Blaine House next year. So far this year, seven of the 21 candidates for governor hope to stage campaigns supported by the Maine Clean Election Fund, but state elections officials are preparing for only three. But even that number might put a strain on the system.**

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At the state Ethics Commission -- there's growing concern that Maine's publicly-financed politicians may have to be allowed to raise more money privately. That's because the fund may not be able to keep up with the number of qualifying gubernatorial candidates.

If there were just two candidates, each might potentially draw down \$1.2 million dollars from the fund. But what if there are three -- or five? And what if the demand for additional funds arrives at a time when the governor is facing a budget shortfall of more than a half billion dollars over the next 20 months?

"Obviously the Maine Legislature and the governor are in a very tough position, given the economic climate," says Alison Smith, of Maine Citizens for Clean Elections. Smith has some advice for the state Ethics Commission, which is trying to develop some kind of a contingency plan for public funding of candidates.

Smith says that despite the current economic situation, the Legislature should find the money next year to fully fund all Clean Election candidates. "We continue to believe that there's a lot of value in the clean election system, that elections are a public good," Smith says. "Who runs, how they run, how they fund their campaigns makes a difference to Maine people, it makes a difference in the policies that are passed in the Legislature and whether those policies serve Maine people or whether they serve other interests."

Although Maine law requires the state to make annual transfers to the Clean Election Fund, some of that money in recent years has been redirected to help balance the budget -- and those withdrawals have never been fully repaid.

"You do have an obligation as this commission to be aggressive with the Legislature to say, 'We want that money back, and we don't want you to take anymore,'" says David Bright, the campaign manager for Green Party candidate Lynne Williams, who is running as a Clean Election candidate.

Bright says a proposal to allow those candidates to raise up to \$142,000 dollars each in private contributions to offset the loss of state funding is contrary to the spirit and intent of the law, which was crafted to reduce the influence of special interests and private contributors in Maine politics.

"The fact of the matter is that the concept of clean elections from day one has been that you get better government out of it," Bright says. "And if we end up messing around with the election system, everything else that Legislature does could be suspect if you can't trust your elections. So elections and the electoral process are the foundation of everything that goes on in this building."

"What we're seeing now is that lots and lots of people are getting into the race that don't have the capacity or the desire to raise and finance their own campaigns with their own supporters," says Democrat Rosa Scarcelli of Portland, who is staging a privately-funded campaign. She says she opposes the idea of allowing more private money into publicly-funded campaigns.

"I believe that if we have Clean Election funds and we start to change the rules mid-cycle, we're doing a disservice to the Maine people, who probably as they pay attention to this, will find it troubling that we're paying for funding for campaigns, rather than paying for programs, when we're going to cut another \$400 million out of our budget in this emergency session," Scarcelli says.

"I think there's been a growing assault on the clean elections," says Ed Youngblood, who represents Republicans on the Commission on Governmental Ethics and Election Practices. He says the economy could actually provide an opportunity for those who would be just as happy to see the Maine Clean Election Fund disappear from the state's political landscape.

"It has been eroding, and I would expect it would continue to erode unless the people of the state come up with some alternative and say, 'Hey, enough is enough. We really want this in place,'" Youngblood says.

Members of the Ethics Commission are scheduled to continue exploring possible options for the Maine Clean Election Fund in January.