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STATE HOUSE

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Four running for Blaine House likely to qualify for Clean Election financing

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AUGUSTA — Four candidates running for governor could qualify for public financing and be eligible for up to \$600,000 in taxpayer money for their primary campaigns.

Prior to today's deadline, one Republican and two Democrats had already turned in the checks and seed money needed to qualify.

Democrat John Richardson is expected to turn in the final paperwork today, according to his campaign.

“This is the first time Democrats have used Clean Elections in the gubernatorial race, so it's something of a landmark this year,” said

Alison Smith, steering committee co-chairwoman for Maine Citizens for Clean Elections, an advocacy group that monitors and promotes use of the system.

Republican Sen. Peter Mills of Cornville has already been certified and has received the maximum \$600,000 to fund his primary campaign, Smith said.

And Democrats Patrick McGowan and Senate President Elizabeth Mitchell, D-Vassalboro, announced this week they believe they have met the requirements to qualify. Richardson has until 5 p.m. to complete the process.

“Yes, I believe we will (qualify),” said Richardson's campaign manager, Monica Castellanos. “I'm sorting through paperwork right now.”

The Maine Commission on Governmental Ethics and Election Practices has until April 8 to review applications from Democrats, to ensure that all the requirements have been met.

At least one Republican is trying to make an issue of the use of public money to fund political campaigns.

Matt Jacobson, who is raising private money for his campaign, has said in recent weeks, and repeated in a statement Tuesday, that he doesn't think taxpayer money should be used to pay for

“political lawn signs and bumper stickers.”

Jacobson used his opposition to the system in a fundraising letter sent out via e-mail titled “Taxpayer-funded Election Welfare.”

The state is expected to spend \$8.5 million to \$9 million on legislative and gubernatorial races this election cycle, Smith said.

Maine has a public-financing system because voters approved a citizen initiative in 1996 to allow gubernatorial and legislative candidates to use public money to pay for their campaigns. The system was first implemented in 2000 for legislative candidates and 2002 for gubernatorial candidates, Smith said.

She said national polls show voters want candidates to use public money to reduce the influence of special interests.

“It’s not the time to turn elections over to those who can make large contributions,” she said.

No successful gubernatorial candidate has used the system. Gov. John Baldacci, a Democrat first elected in 2002 and re-elected in 2006, raised private money to fund his campaigns.

Candidates running for office in Maine can choose to use public money or raise private money to pay for campaigns. The 12 party-affiliated candidates on the June ballot have chosen different methods, even within their own parties.

Mills is the only Republican to participate in the system. Jacobson, Steve Abbott, Bill Beardsley, Paul LePage, Les Otten and Bruce Poliquin are all privately financed.

And because Otten reported more than \$600,000 in his war chest in January, Mills got an initial installment of public money that included the first disbursement of \$400,000 and the maximum amount of matching money of \$200,000, Smith said.

The system allows for matching money for Clean Election candidates to try to level the playing field for those who are competing against privately funded candidates.

Democrats who are using the system will get an initial disbursement of \$400,000, but won’t receive any other funds unless their opponents receive or spend more than that.

Privately funded Democrats Rosa Scarcelli and Steve Rowe will be required to begin regular reporting once they exceed the \$400,000 mark. As of January, they both reported about \$250,000.

If any of the Clean Election candidates wins in June, they will then become eligible for up to \$1.2 million for the general election. That includes \$600,000 in initial disbursement and up to \$600,000 in matching money.

When it comes to independent candidates, none appears to be actively working to meet today's deadline, although at least two had indicated an interest in using state money, Smith said.

For this election cycle, the requirements have been toughened to "keep public funds out of the hands of marginal candidates," she said.

The requirements call for candidates to collect 3,250 qualifying contributions in the amount of \$5 each and raise \$40,000 in seed money.

"It is, in fact, very difficult to qualify for Clean Election funds," Smith said.

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