

Portland Press Herald

March 7

Clean challenge: Public financing elusive for some

Less-mainstream gubernatorial candidates say they won't be able to fulfill tougher requirements.

By [Matt Wickenheiser mwickenheiser@mainetoday.com](mailto:mwickenheiser@mainetoday.com)
Staff Writer

There are new, higher thresholds for political candidates seeking public financing, and some gubernatorial contenders are finding out how big the challenge is.

Four of the seven Blaine House hopefuls running as Clean Election candidates said they expect to meet all the requirements to get public funding.

They are all established candidates, relatively well-known in Maine political circles: Democrats Patrick McGowan, Elizabeth Mitchell and John Richardson and Republican Peter Mills.

Three others, however, said last week they will not meet the requirements. They are less mainstream candidates: Former Biddeford Mayor Donna Dion, a Democrat; and two unenrolled candidates, John Whitcomb and Christopher Cambron. All three said they are still running, but not with public financing.

In past gubernatorial elections, candidates seeking public financing had to collect 2,500 \$5 checks from registered Maine voters, each made out to the Maine Clean Election Fund. In 2007, the Legislature raised that number to 3,250.

In addition, Clean-Election hopefuls now have to raise \$40,000 in campaign seed money. The checks, and proof they have raised the \$40,000, are due April 1.

"The Legislature made the decision that the threshold had to be pretty high. They needed to see a high level of support from registered voters," said Jonathan Wayne, executive director of the state's Ethics Commission, which oversees the Clean Election Fund.

Any candidate who meets the requirements will receive \$400,000 before the June 8 primaries. Candidates who make it through the primaries will get another \$600,000 leading to the Nov. 2 general election. They'll also receive matching funds before the general election should their opponents reach certain spending levels. In all, the candidates would each likely receive at least \$1.4 million.

The Clean Election Fund gets money from the state's general fund (\$2 million a year), as well as from the \$5 checks collected by candidates, and from taxpayers who check off a box on their state returns indicating they want to donate to the fund.

Wayne said there's a range of views at the State House as to what the purpose of the Clean Election Fund should be. Some think it should be a vehicle for more nontraditional candidates to run. Others think it should be available only to candidates who stand a chance of winning.

Mills said the higher Clean Election Fund thresholds stem from the argument that only viable candidates should qualify -- a line of reasoning that gained traction in the last gubernatorial election, in 2006.

Incumbent Gov. John Baldacci, a Democrat, won with 209,927 votes. Chandler Woodcock, the Republican candidate and a Clean Election recipient, received 166,425 votes, and two other Clean Election candidates, Pat LaMarche and Barbara Merrill, received 52,690 and 118,715 votes, respectively.

Mills qualified for Clean Election funds but lost to Woodcock in the primary. John Michael, an unenrolled candidate, came close to qualifying for Clean Election funds but didn't make it through the primary.

Mills suggested that the candidacies of Michael and Merrill, in particular, spurred the change in qualifying thresholds.

"It definitely will exclude a lot of people from the system -- it's probably more stringent than needed," said Mills.

Brenda Cambron, candidate Christopher Cambron's wife and campaign treasurer, said it's been a struggle to meet the limits. She relayed a message from her husband: "Poor people can't run for office, elections are made for the rich."

Whitcomb and Dion both said it was difficult to meet the requirements while holding a full-time job.

"Money shouldn't be a factor. That's what I'm going to prove," said Whitcomb.

Dion said she planned to continue under the guidelines of the Clean Elections Act, not taking campaign donations larger than \$100. She said the high hurdle of collecting the \$5 checks and \$40,000 in seed money was too difficult.

"I thought it was going to be a lot easier," said Dion. "Even the candidates that are connected seem to be having a problem."

Mills said his organization started gathering checks and seed money donations on Oct. 15 and has been focused on that activity for five months. He personally has collected about 350 checks, he said, and he has a brother who's collected more than 800.

Other campaign volunteers have collected checks, too, and he expected to handily hit the deadline. The seed money was raised very quickly, said Mills.

But it is difficult to get people to write \$5 checks to a state fund, said Mills. You have to explain the whole system, and it's a lot of time and energy spent for a \$5 check, he said. Then the campaigns have to validate with local communities that the people who gave the checks are registered voters, before turning in the checks, said Mills.

"We're going to have our 3,250," said Mills on Thursday.

Marc Malon, Mitchell's campaign manager, acknowledged the additional burdens.

"Whenever you increase the standard for anything, it makes it more difficult than it was before," said Malon. "We're going to get there. We're well on the way."

Malon said the campaign is pushing online \$5 donations, using social networking tools such as Twitter and Facebook, as well as e-mail blasts directing donors to a state Web site. More of the \$5 donations have been done online than have been made by check, he said. The campaign has two part-time employees who are getting paid by the hour to get \$5 checks, as well, Malon said.

Richardson said collecting the checks was a "daunting task." He said several of the groups that endorsed him, including the Maine State Troopers Association and the Maine Association of Police, have helped in collecting checks through their memberships.

"The bar has been set higher. It has been made more difficult. But in these tough economic times, perhaps it ought to be difficult to receive a portion of your campaign monies from the public," said Richardson. "We're going to meet that bar."

Brandon Maheu, McGowan's campaign manager, said they've got paid staff, including grass-roots organizers, working to collect the \$5 donations, along with a broad base of volunteers throughout the state.

"It's definitely been challenging, but we're doing very well and were confident we'll turn in the required stuff to Ethics by 5 o'clock April 1," he said.

Those involved in making Clean Election hurdles for campaigns said doing so would be a stamp of legitimacy and would also get fundraising out of the way, allowing candidates to focus on other parts of the stump.

"That's a major test that it gets passed, it's a monkey off your back, it's an organizational hurdle," said Malon. "It's one whole aspect of the campaign we don't have worry about; we have our money, we know our budget."

Staff Writer Matt Wickenheiser can be contacted at 791-6316 or at: mwickenheiser@pressherald.com