

Beacon Hill Byline by Mary Rogeness

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Public Funding of Elections

In the last Byline I promised to discuss the ballot initiative that was adopted by Massachusetts voters in November, the proposal to provide public funding for legislative and statewide offices. Sponsored by the organizations Mass Voters for Clean Elections, the initiative apparently endorsed the premise that elections are "dirty" if they are not funded with tax dollars.

Now that the initiative has become law, its advocates are lobbying to have the legislature appropriate the \$52 million that will be required to pay for it in 2002, the first year it applies. They request an appropriation of \$12.2 million to initiate that funding.

Here are some of the mechanics of law. I use the single example of state representative, but it applies to constitutional and legislative offices.

According to the new law, a race for state representative should cost no more than \$30,000 from primary through election day. The candidate must collect donations between \$5 and \$100 from 200 donors to receive \$24,000 from the state. If the candidate is unopposed in either the primary or general election, funds are reduced. And if a candidate rejects public funding, opposing candidates can access public dollars to match spending of the nonparticipating candidate.

The law challenges the cultures of elective office in Massachusetts and our statutes that allow campaign money to be used for district offices, for district-wide mailings and for many other ongoing costs that accompany elective office. Such expenditures outside of the campaign season are not covered by the new law, and advocates suggest enhancing other areas of the budget to cover such legitimate expenses.

The law does not offer any way to provide the services that are presently provided through campaign funds, but any alternative would be likely to involve further costs to the state.

As you may assume from today's column, I am not a fan of the new law. It grants substantial campaign money to candidates who raise a little as \$1,000. It provides the incentive of public financing to candidates for state offices while withholding it from municipal or county office. And it requires a substantial state appropriation that will of necessity take money from other budget items.

Taxpayers have long had the option to designate one dollar of their taxes to an election fund, an option rejected by 90% of tax filers. I wonder if they understood that our appropriation of money for campaigns will take that money from other projects. Advocates say it is "only \$12 million," but that amount could fill other needs. Budget requests come to my attention every day for funding for such needs as libraries, special education, road repair, human service salaries, councils on aging, senior pharmacy program and home health services. Many programs seem to need just a little more money in one account or another.

This is my question to you, the voters who approved "Clean Elections." Do you want your tax dollars to fund campaigns for state office at the expense of other public needs - or do you endorse that funding through the existing funds that are collected through the voluntary checkoff on tax returns.