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“DEMOCRACY DOLLARS“ WILL BE PROPOSITION 2 ON CITY’S NOV. ELECTION BALLOT

Citizen-initiated Ballot Measure will Broaden, Strengthen Public Financing Program Started by Voters in 2005

This fall’s municipal election ballot will include a long-sought change to the Open and Ethical Elections Code to encourage broader voter and candidate participation in the city’s public financing system through “Democracy Dollars.”

Last summer, approximately 28,000 citizens signed petitions to get the measure on the ballot. It will allow ordinary citizens to make small donations to publicly financed candidates of their choice by using a city-issued coupon.

The change in the 14-year-old public financing program will not require new taxes.

The measure will appear near the end of the ballot. It asks:

“Shall the City of Albuquerque adopt the following amendments to update the language of the Open and Ethical Elections Code, which provides for public financing of City candidates: provide eligible residents with Democracy Dollars, to contribute to their choice of qualified candidates, which the candidates could redeem with the City Clerk, up to a limit for funds to spend in support of their campaigns as directed by the City Council, and increase the funds for publicly financed mayoral candidates? This will not increase the tax rate.”

Advocates, including Common Cause New Mexico, Organizers in the Land of Enchantment (OLE), the Center for Civic Policy, the Working Families Party and Equality New Mexico, say that the change in the public financing system will encourage more participation from everyday people and make candidates more responsive to voter needs not special interests.

Almost 70 percent of city voters supported public financing in 2005, allowing candidates who wish to participate to receive a stipend if they agree to limit spending and not accept private contributions. The idea was to decrease reliance on big donors and special interests. But the system today is handicapped by a Supreme Court decision that outlawed “triggered” matching funds—extra money for



publicly financed candidates that helped them compete with candidates who raise huge, private donations or face dark-money PACS.

This year, 10 candidates for city council are using the current system, which many say does not provide enough funds—especially if they face negative advertising sponsored by private donors. But each year the number of mayoral candidates who use the system has declined. In 2017 only one candidate, Tim Keller, utilized the system.

“We are glad that there is interest in public financing in Albuquerque this year,” says Rebecca Glenn, of the ABQ Democracy Dollars Coalition. “We’d like to take it even further, by engaging more voters and more small donors to make the system more inclusive and democracy stronger.”

The new program uses \$3.1 million from the Open and Ethical Elections Fund to send every qualified resident a coupon valid for one \$25 contribution to a publicly financed candidate of their choice. Candidates and their campaigns can “raise” this money by reaching out to everyday Albuquerque voters, not the usual group of wealthy donors and PACs. Voters give their contributions to candidates by filling in the candidate’s name, signing the voucher, and either giving it to the candidate or mailing it to the City Clerk.

“Democracy Dollars give ordinary people a way to engage in their community and believe that they can influence the way politicians behave,” says Liberty Kinsel, who, along with many others, circulated petitions to get the initiative on the ballot. “It’s a great way to tap into a new pool of talent and energy of people who have not participated, but who can now run, contribute and participate in our democratic system.”

In 2017, only 400 donors – who each gave \$1,000 or more – contributed the vast majority of all dollars collected by privately-funded candidates, according to data from the city’s campaign finance data set. Overall, campaign donors were significantly whiter, older and higher-income than the general population.

“The modernized system will give candidates a reason to reach out to ordinary voters not just big donors who do not tend to be representative of our entire community,” says Heather Ferguson, executive director of Common Cause New Mexico. “And it gives ordinary voters more of a stake in local elections, where voter turnout has been very low.”

Ferguson also said it would incentivize candidates to knock on doors, meet ordinary voters and talk about local—not special—interests.

Albuquerque would not be the first to implement a Democracy Dollars system. Seattle implemented the system for city council races in 2017, and the Washington Supreme Court recently upheld the program unanimously. Washington, DC, is now developing rules for its program and presidential-hopeful Kirsten Gillibrand has proposed a national program of Democracy Dollars.



For a video animation explaining how Democracy Dollars will work and an additional video including personal testimony on why Albuquerque should adopt the new system, go to:

<https://www.burquebucks.org/videos>

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ABQ Democracy Dollars is a coalition of community groups including Common Cause New Mexico, the Center for Civic Policy, Equality New Mexico (EQNM), Organizers in the Land of Enchantment (OLE), and the Working Families Party of New Mexico.

