

Voter-Owned Elections: The 60-cent question

BY ISRAEL BAYER
STAFF WRITER

Portland voters will decide this coming November whether or not to continue with Voter-Owned Elections. The program allows for candidates to recruit 1,000 \$5 donations to qualify for \$150,000 in city funding toward a primary race, and \$200,000 if the candidate makes it to the general election.

The program has heralded some successes in its five-year history, helping current City Commissioner Amanda Fritz get elected to City Council, and supporting former commissioner Erik Sten who spearheaded the program during his tenure in office.

The program has also seen some busts. Most recently, Jesse Cornett, a Democratic insider spent more than \$145,000 of public money for a mere 8 percent of the vote in May's primary election against incumbent Dan Saltzman.

Street Roots invited the League of Women Voters, a strong supporter of the system, and the Portland Business Alliance, a powerful downtown business organization that has opposed Voter-Owned Elections, to a question and answer session on the topic. The Portland Business Alliance declined the invitation.

Carol Cushman, membership director with the League of Women Voters, had these comments to our questions:

Israel Bayer: How is Voter-Owned Elections shaping our city and how it operates?

Carol Cushman: Voter-Owned Elections (VOE) benefits Portland voters by allowing grassroots candidates to seek elective office based on their experience, ideas and values rather than on whether they have access to large campaign donors. After meeting strict qualifying requirements, Voter-Owned Elections candidates are banned from raising money from downtown developers, or other special interests. Instead they can spend their time talking directly with voters. Independence is gained when reform program candidates are elected. They can focus on community

concerns because there isn't pressure on them to give special consideration to large campaign donors, as historically has been the case for privately-funded candidates.

Voter-Owned Elections enables everyday Portlanders to decide who should run for office. A VOE candidate has to gather signatures and \$5 contributions from at least 1,000 Portland voters to qualify. After meeting this rigorous threshold and agreeing to raise no more money and to strict rules on campaign spending, qualifying candidates receive adequate public funds to run a viable campaign. Their spending is limited and election administrators closely regulate their campaigns.

Because of Voter-Owned Elections, a neighborhood activist like Commissioner Amanda Fritz, only the seventh woman to serve on the City Council in its 160-year history, can win with grassroots support from everyday Portlanders from neighborhoods across Portland.

I.B.: From the Oregonian Editorial Board on May 22, "After five years — and \$1,755,869 spent on 11 council candidates (two of whom won, Amanda Fritz and Erik Sten) — it's not clear that the city's Voter-Owned Election system has done anything to boost the integrity or even the vitality of city elections." How would you respond to this analysis?

C.C.: Prior to Voter-Owned Elections, the candidate who spent the most money won 87 percent of the time, often in uncompetitive campaigns without a meaningful discussion of city issues. Before VOE, a candidate spent \$1 million to win election — almost all raised from large donors, many of whom have interests that might be affected by decisions made at City Hall. Even the appearance of easy access

and special favors for donors damages trust and faith in city government. Since VOE began, even candidates who choose not to participate are voluntarily limiting their campaign spending and limiting how much money they'll take from a donor. It's clear to see that even in the few elections since it began, Voter-Owned Elections is reducing special interest influence and reducing the total amount of campaign spending and

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large special interest contributions.

The cost of Voter-Owned Elections program is capped at two-tenths on one percent of the city budget and involves no new taxes or fees. We're not even close to that limit and this fact puts the \$1,755,869 cost into perspective.

It is helpful to divide the \$1.7 million cost by the five years the program has been in effect and our City's population and you will see it works out to 60 cents per Portlander per year. Portland voters understand they are getting a bargain by spending 60 cents per year in return for fair and equitable campaigns protected from the interests of the downtown developers and big business who have

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Carol Cushman

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In its five years, only two City Council candidates were elected to office under the voter-owned elections provision: Incumbent Erik Sten (top), who championed the provision, and Amanda Fritz.



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