

OPINION

Fair, Open and Accountable Elections

A counterweight to wealthy special interests

BY KAYSE JAMA



When I was growing up in Somalia, I remember wondering what it would be like to be able to vote and choose who our next president, governor or our mayor would be. Of course, that was not an option in Somalia, but now I am a United States citizen and I take my electoral participation very seriously.

Here in the US, I know that "one person, one vote" should be what matters. Unfortunately, money is what matters — and there are people who are voting with their wallets who want to keep it that way.

What if instead of spending time on the phone calling wealthy donors and special interests for money, our candidates ran for local office in a way that trained them to be good public servants? What if they spent their time talking with everyday voters instead? And what if, once we elected them to office, our candidates remained accountable and accessible to us, rather than those wealthy donors and special interests?

Under Portland's Voter-Owned Elections, we can have just that. In fact, we already do, but we'll have to vote yes on 26-108 this November if we want to protect our program that keeps our local elections fair, open and accountable.

In 2005, the Portland City Council passed Voter-Owned Elections to allow candi-

dates to run based on their ideas, values, and community support rather than on their ability to raise money. They also agreed to put the program on the November 2010 ballot for us all to vote on. Voting Yes on Measure 26-108 will keep Voter-Owned Elections in place and prevent the Portland Business Alliance and other wealthy special interests from drowning out the voices of everyday Portlanders.

The organization that I lead, the Center for Intercultural Organizing, empowers many Portlanders who have historically

choose to use the program are required to collect at least 1,000 (1,500 for mayoral candidates) \$5 contributions just to qualify for a limited amount of public financing. Candidates are then free to continue listening to and earning support from everyday Portlanders. And, when they're in office, there are no big donors to worry about — just the voters who elected them.

This means we get more choices and better representation in City Hall.

Voter-Owned Elections is getting big money out of politics — candidates using the program don't accept any private funding once they qualify. It has only been in place for three election cycles but has already seen two candidates to run and win. The program is limited to 0.2 percent of the budget and has never even come close to that cap. If we vote yes, no new taxes or fees will occur.

Let's keep Voter-Owned Elections when it comes to the ballot in November. Let's make sure that all of our voices are heard. Let's continue to work together to make Portland a better place. And let's not let special interests dominate our elections or City Hall.

Let's keep our elections fair, open, and accountable. Please join the Center for Intercultural Organizing and more than 30 other community organizations and thousands of everyday people in voting YES on 26-108. Visit www.yesforportland.org for more information.

Kayse Jama of Portland is the founder of the Center for Intercultural Organizing.

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been shut out of the political process to develop a unified voice, advocate for their rights, and create an environment in which they are recognized and supported as valued community members. In that same spirit, Voter-Owned Elections provide a pathway for everyone to participate in the political process, not just those that have money or political capital.

At the heart of the program is the goal of fairness. Portland voters can contribute \$5 to help select a candidate that they want to represent them in City Hall. That \$5 makes just as much difference as someone who can write a big campaign check. No longer do candidates have to spend all their time talking to big donors while ignoring everyday Portlanders — in fact, candidates who

Cultural Heritage Makes Me Diverse

Empty music classroom brings tears

BY KIMBERLY HOWARD

It was a cool summer morning when I stepped into Jefferson High School, on a mission. I was there to meet Alumni President Maggie Mashia and Rose City Music Festival Event Coordinator Bonnie Gilchrist, who'd called me to say, "I have something to share with you. And you have to see it to believe it."

By the end of that morning, I had watched a little less than 500 students gather on the field during an unexpected fire alarm drill, and been taken on a tour of what is now Jefferson High

School's empty music department classrooms.

As manager of the Oregon Cultural Trust, the only cultural funding mechanism of its kind in the nation, and as a trained performing artist, I ended our tour of a ransacked choir room, empty practice cubicles and a sheet music-strewn classroom, in tears. I was standing in a beautiful wood-lined room full of marching band uniforms, purchased in the 1980s and never worn.

This is why I do what I do, I thought. This is why I spend my days making sure that Oregonians know that the Cultural Trust is how we provide our young people with the tools to imagine their futures — as musicians, artists, teachers. It is how we pro-

vide our young people with the tools to preserve and celebrate their past, as African-Americans, Latino-Americans, Native-Americans, Asian-Americans, and European-Americans in Oregon. It is how we provide our young people with the tools to think critically and with a spirit of exploration to be civic and com-

munity leaders.

Oregonians are the why. The Oregon Cultural Trust is the how. Culture makes me diverse because it asks me to look closely at our world, to see it, imagine it, create it.

Kimberly Howard is trust manager for the Oregon Cultural Trust.

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