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## FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS ABOUT THE WEST VIRGINIA PUBLIC CAMPAIGN FINANCING ACT

**What is the WV Public Campaign Financing Act?** The WV Public Campaign Financing Act is a comprehensive approach to campaign finance reform that would encourage more participation in our democracy and help restore public confidence in the legislative process. It is modeled after laws in place in seven states (including Maine, Arizona and Connecticut) and establishes a **voluntary alternative** to the current system of funding campaigns. Candidates qualify for public funding by agreeing not to accept any private donations and demonstrating public support by collecting a certain number of signatures along with \$5 contributions from registered voters in their district.

**Why do we need the WV Public Campaign Financing Act?** A recent report in *the West Virginia Public Affairs Reporter* revealed some alarming statistics about West Virginians' opinions of state and local government. According to the report, "large percentages of West Virginians (38.2%) are still convinced that the state Legislature is controlled by special interest [lobbyists]. 57.2% of West Virginians believe the state is run by a few big interests looking out for themselves, and that state government can only sometimes (58.6%) or almost never (13.2%) be trusted to do what is right." While the latest survey, conducted in 2005, shows that West Virginians' opinion of state government is improving compared with a similar 1992 survey, there is still room for improvement since only 8.4% of those surveyed thought voters had the most influence over lawmakers.

One way to restore voters' faith in government is to fundamentally change the way we finance election campaigns. Public financing is a comprehensive approach to campaign finance reform designed to help level the playing field by giving people from many backgrounds a shot at getting elected without relying on special interest groups and lobbyists to help finance their campaigns.

**Will a public financing system really work?** Maine and Arizona became the first two states to implement full public financing in the 2000 election. In these pioneering states, the system won the praise of incumbents and challengers, Democrats and Republicans, and it is now the political norm to run for office free from direct dependence on private campaign contributions. 82% of eligible candidates in Maine and 60% of eligible candidates in Arizona ran as publicly financed candidates in 2006. In addition, Connecticut's new "Citizens' Election" program, saw participation rates in excess of 70% it's first year (2008). Public financing has:

- ✓ Increased electoral competition and voter choice
- ✓ Freed candidates from fundraising and allowed them to run more issue oriented campaigns
- ✓ Achieved greater financial equality among candidates
- ✓ Helped reduce the influence of special interests in government decision- making

**Why should candidates support a public financing system?** As the cost of campaigns has risen, candidates have been forced to spend more and more time fundraising, and less time with voters. Few candidates like spending so much time raising money, every year. Public financing would free candidates from the incessant need to raise campaign funds, allowing them to focus on issues and spend more time interacting with voters. Publicly financed candidates are spared from the fundraising demands that have undermined faith in our political process.

**Does the WV Clean Elections Act limit free speech?** No. Public financing is designed to give a voice to those candidates who do not have personal fortunes or access to special interest contributions. The influence of money creates a closed and entrenched system, in which well-qualified people are prevented from running for office because they lack personal wealth or connections. The WV Public Campaign Financing Act would add new voices and more balance to our political process by giving people of many backgrounds an opportunity to run for office with a fair shot at being elected.

**Is it Constitutional?** Yes. The WV Public Campaign Financing Act is constitutional because it establishes a **voluntary alternative** to the special interest funding of political campaigns. Candidates can reject public funds and continue to finance their campaigns under the current system.

**How much public money can candidates get?** Candidates who qualify receive a competitive amount of public money for the primary and general election. The allotment is based on the median amount raised by winning candidates for that office in the prior elections. If a privately funded candidate spends more than the amount allocated, a publicly financed candidate is eligible for additional funding up to 200% of the original limit.

**How much will public financing cost?** Public financing costs only about \$6 per household. In West Virginia, if participation reaches current levels in Maine, Arizona and Connecticut, the amount needed to adequately fund legislative races would be less than 1/10 of 1% of the state's budget. That's a reasonable amount to pay for broader participation in our electoral process.

#### **Where would the money come from?**

There are a number of options:

- All \$5 qualifying and left over seed money contributions
- Fines levied for violation of election laws
- Revenue from a \$3 state tax check-off program
- A 10-15% surcharge on civil and criminal penalties over \$1,000
- A percentage of unclaimed (abandoned) property
- Interest generated by the Public Campaign Financing Fund
- Other sources decided by the Legislature

**Won't the WV Public Campaign Financing Act enable "fringe candidates" to run for office with public money?** The show of public support required to qualify for public financing will weed out frivolous candidates. A candidate must gather a large number of small donations from registered voters in their district. Based on the experience in other states, there is no evidence that public financing encourages non-serious candidates, as there are penalties for misuse of any public campaign funds.

**Won't the WV Public Campaign Financing Act undermine the strength of and need for political parties?** Public financing allows political parties to play a vital role within the political process as long as they do not serve as a conduit through which special interest campaign contributors can gain influence over elected officials.

#### **For more information contact:**

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