

Opinion: Money talks, voters are listening

By **Lisa Markovitz**

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The 2022 Howard County election cycle was to be the first to include the Citizens' Election Fund, a public financing system for County Executive and Council races, approved via referendum, by over 76,000 voters. Candidates who agree to accept only from individuals, up to \$250, can qualify. That means no donations from corporations, unions, PACs, nor similar organizations. Matching funds can then be provided to those who meet strict criteria, and have contested races.

CEF candidate Council Member Deb Jung publicized that she was State certified, qualified to receive the matching funds. Her funding is being withheld by the County, noting a problem in the wording of the original CEF Bill about when a race is "contested". In one part of the Bill it says a race is contested if there are more candidates than elected positions. Elsewhere it says contested races are determined in August; the legislative intent there was a general election notation.

A broad public clamor for an emergency legislative fix ensued across the political spectrum, from local and state entities. County Executive Calvin Ball and Council Members were implored to remedy the issue and release the funds immediately. Not to do so would risk the ability to properly administer the program and damage its viability.

Since Allan Kittleman, former Howard County Executive, currently running against incumbent Dr. Calvin Ball, is using the CEF, and Dr. Ball is not using it, delays in remedying the campaign finance process have been wrought with controversy.

Council Member Christiana Rigby, who had previously announced her intention to use the CEF, sought an Ethics Commission opinion on whether or not she could vote on the remedy Bill, as she had filed to use the CEF program. Complaints filed with the State about her prior developer donations were dismissed due to her using a new campaign finance account.

Council zoning decisions often financially benefit developers who contribute large sums to Council campaign accounts. Should Council Members recuse themselves from voting on those issues too?

The CEF controversy has many seeking to implement a financing pledge directly with candidates. The CEF was meant to reduce the role of large, private contributions in local campaigns. Putting community interests over special interests is a commendable goal. With the program in such disarray, there is no better time for other endeavors to seek the same goals.

There is widespread desire for candidates to specifically not take developer funding. A recently launched pledge is being co-sponsored by The Progressive Democrats of Howard County (PDHC), The People's Voice Ethics Ballot, The Howard County Citizens Association, The Sunrise Movement of Howard County, Our Revolution Howard County MD, and the Indian Origin Network of Howard County called the "No Developer Money" pledge. Jake Burdett, President of PDHC stated "Voters across the political spectrum want to see an end to pay-to-play developer influence; thus, the pledge has bipartisan support. It is a shame that in such a wealthy county, we cannot afford to provide basic services for our community due to large corporate subsidies for developers at the local level."

Howard County has seen a lot of contention with land use decisions over the years. When there are debates over increasing residential density, concerns include school overcapacities, environmental preservation, storm water management and congestion. The issue of how best to supply more affordable housing units also becomes a contentious topic, as some believe that increased building is the answer. Market rate projects, however, include little to no affordable units, due to fees that are allowed to be paid to be allowed to not provide the required minimums. Decision-makers on these issues should take whatever steps possible to allay the voters' fears of conflicts. We need to know that environmental, school system, and affordable housing concerns can all be addressed objectively; first by fixing and using the CEF program, and by taking the No Developer Money pledge.

Editor's note: Lisa Markovitz's column was unintentionally omitted from the January issue of The Business Monthly. Her column is presented on Bizmonthly.com and is expected to return in the March issue.