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Coalition Members, Legislators Highlight Advantages of Public Financing
Supreme Court candidates will have alternative to special interest funding in 2012

(Charleston, W.Va.) Supporters of publicly financed elections gathered at the State Capitol to highlight the advantages of the West Virginia Supreme Court Public Campaign Financing Pilot Project, which was recommended by Governor Joe Manchin and adopted by the legislature earlier this year.

“In light of recent controversies that made West Virginia a national poster child for the dangers of special interest money in court elections, this pilot project is a positive step,” said Julie Archer of West Virginia Citizen Action Group.

In 2012, candidates for the Supreme Court will have a publicly financed alternative to funding their campaigns with money from special interests and attorneys whose cases they may later decide. “Candidates will not have to worry who will pay for the campaigns,” stated Kathy Stoltz of the League of Women Voters. “And the voters will not have to worry about who paid for the election.”

Delegate John Doyle (D- Jefferson) noted that it is not just a question of where the money comes from. “I don’t like spending a lot of my time begging for money. I should be out talking to voters, seeing what their ideas are.” Adopting public financing for other offices, in addition to the Supreme Court, would allow candidates to spend more time with their constituents, ascertaining what issues are important to them.

In addition, with the burgeoning costs of running any campaign, public financing is an option that may allow good candidates who do not have ready access to wealth to run for office. “I’d like to see an increased pool of candidates, as has happened in Maine and Arizona - states that have public financing programs,” said Senator Dan Foster (D-Kanawha). “I believe it would increase voter turnout and decrease cynicism.”

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Delegate Barbara Fleischauer (D- Monongalia) pointed out that the public financing program's requirements encourage candidates to run grassroots campaigns, rewarding hard work and taking away a perception of elitism. "You shouldn't have to be a millionaire to run for the Supreme Court; this law will even the playing field, giving a fairer chance to those who are not independently wealthy," she said.

"Our political process used to be thoughtful and deliberative," said Delegate Nancy Guthrie (D-Kanawha). "Now it's more like mud wrestling. I worry about our young people becoming cynical."

Supporters stressed the importance of maintaining fair and impartial courts and how public financing can help to rid judicial and other elections of the appearance of corruption due to the large amounts of money being spent. In North Carolina, for example, public financing has effectively shielded judges from special interest influence and they have not seen any large scale outside spending or negative advertising since their program began in 2002.

"Money from out of state is particularly distasteful," added Larry Matheney of the AFL-CIO, "especially since we may have no idea where it is coming from, or whose money it was."

Secretary of State Natalie Tennant was on hand to accept contributions to the Public Campaign Financing Fund. The Secretary made the first donation in June, because she believes strongly in and supports the purposes of the program. "I wanted to personally donate because I believe in this process that is trying to put ideas ahead of money," Tennant said at the time. "This is not about any particular candidate, this is about public financing that would level the playing field so that all candidates' voices can be heard."

Attendees at the event made donations totaling over \$1,800 to the fund for the pilot project. Other citizens who want to support the program. Individuals and organizations can contribute to the fund by contacting the Secretary of State's office at (304) 558-6000 or (866) 767-8683.

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