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City ponders banning donations from unions, companies

Plan would only allow individual contributions

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CITY HALL BUREAU CHIEF

Toronto could soon become the first city in Ontario to ban corporate and union donations in municipal election campaigns.

The executive committee voted 7-4 yesterday to ask for a draft bylaw outlawing such donations, permitting only contributions from individuals. City council would make the final decision in the fall.

Councillor Michael Walker, who pushed for the ban along with Councillors Cliff Jenkins and Chin Lee, said it will result in more transparency in municipal government.

"We want to have the confidence in our elected representatives that they will go out and get donations from individuals. It's hard work. They won't take the easy donations," Jenkins said.

Councillor Mike Del Grande questioned the reasoning behind a ban.

"Am I going to sell myself for a \$750 contribution? If I was going to sell myself, I would have a condo in Florida." he said. "Think about it: That's what we're saying, (that) we would sell ourselves for \$750, which is the maximum contribution from a business."

Councillor Howard Moscoe warned that with a ban in place, corporate officers and union officials would simply make donations under their own names.

"They will be the same corporation donations, but they will be hidden from the public," Moscoe said.

Corporate campaign donations have been on the decline in Toronto, in part

because some candidates have voluntarily refused them, including Mayor David Miller.

In 2003, corporate donations represented 21.6 per cent of contributions. By 2006, the figure dropped to 12.4 per cent. Union contributions made up 1.1 per cent in 2003 and rose to 2 per cent in 2006.

In contrast, corporate donations represent a much larger proportion of contributions to candidates in surrounding regions, said Robert MacDermid, a York University political science professor who researches the issue.

"In some places, candidates take as much as 80 or 90 per cent of their money from developers," MacDermid said.

"The entire council will have over 50 per cent of their money from developers."