

## Who should pay?

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### *Ban on corporate, union election donations sought*

By [Kris Scheuer](#)

After years of debate, city council is once again considering banning corporate and union donations to candidates in municipal election campaigns.

Looking at the last election, the percentage of funding Toronto councillors took from developers, corporations and unions varies widely.

In the 2006 campaign, eight councillors, including Michael Walker and Joe Mihevc, raised all their funds through individuals. Mayor David Miller also raised his \$1,029,300 through 1,770 donations from individuals.

On the other side of the scale, Councillor Frances Nunziata relied the most on corporations with 72 percent of her campaign financed through these donations.

All three North York councillors received a fair chunk of funding from corporations or unions in the last election.

Don Valley East's Shelley Carroll cites the cost of running a campaign for her opposition to the proposed reforms.

"My issue with banning corporate and union donations is you are not replacing it with anything," she said. "Running a credible campaign is expensive."

Instead of the current system, whereby donors are eligible for rebates of up to 75 percent, Carroll would like a system similar to that used in New York City.

"Instead of asking for a donation of \$100 and 18 months later (donors) get \$75 back," she said, "instead you ask for \$25 donations . . . and then get \$75 from the city."

There are all kinds of rules for New York candidates to qualify for the public matching funds program, including demonstrating sufficient community support through nomination signatures. New York also has an independent election finance board that can perform routine audits on candidates prior to the election date.

Carroll plans to ask city staff to look at how this model could be implemented in Toronto. However, for now she doesn't support eliminating corporate and union donations, she said Feb. 3.

"There's a perception that donations influence votes," said Carroll, chair of the budget committee. "If that was the case, that donations influenced votes, then any (budget) increases would always be a matter of who donated to my campaign. If you do the research, you will find that's not the reality."

One group pushing for these reforms is Vote Toronto, which compiled a new report available at [www.votetoronto.ca](http://www.votetoronto.ca).

As a whole, all Toronto candidates, winners and losers, in the 2006 election received 12.1 percent of their funding from corporations and unions compared to 68.2 percent from individuals.

By contrast, in Pickering, 76.7 percent of campaign funding came from corporations and 18 percent from individual donors.

Willowdale councillor John Filion said he was “pleasantly surprised” these donations were that low for Toronto candidates.

“It shows the atmosphere is different than it used to be,” Filion said. “In the old city of North York prior to amalgamation, most councillors’ campaigns were financed by developers and it did influence councillors’ decisions.

“I support the reforms but it can’t be voluntary,” he added. “It has to apply equally to everyone.”

Willowdale councillor David Shiner did not return calls by press time.

The city has a financial disclosure website that publicly lists where all donations over \$100 come from.

York University professor Robert MacDermid researched 2006 election funding in 10 municipalities, tracking \$10 million in donations to 672 candidates.

The political science professor expressed dismay developers concentrate their donations to high-profile candidates and electing them makes council more development-friendly.

“What is being taken from democracy is a range of views that would be there without corporate donations,” said MacDermid, a member of Vote Toronto.

Back in 2004, Toronto city council voted to ban corporate and union campaign donations but did not have the power to make the policy change for the 2006 election.

The province has since given the city the authority to pass a new bylaw before the 2010 election.

A vote on the new proposal is expected in the fall.

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