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Election rules tightened

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On the eve of another municipal election season, Queen's Park is tightening rules for fundraising and barring incumbents from rolling over their campaign surpluses to the next election.

But it's not ready to do what Toronto has considered: outlawing all corporate or union donations.

Under legislation introduced Tuesday, contributors could continue to give up to \$750 per candidate, but total donations would be capped at \$5,000 within a single municipality.

"We don't want to even have the perception that one company can, in essence, go off and purchase favour with the whole council," said Municipal Affairs Minister Jim Watson. "It forces those companies or individuals to think long and hard about who they want to give the money, as opposed to spreading it out to anyone and everyone."

In smaller communities, however, where there are often fewer than 10 councillors, donors would still be able to influence the majority.

Other proposed changes include:

Moving election day up by two weeks to the fourth Monday in October, before daylight-saving time ends.

Barring councillors from using surpluses in future elections (although they will be allowed to use them in the 2010 campaign). Incumbents sometimes have more money in their war chest than they are allowed to spend.

Requiring councils to appoint compliance and audit committees to oversee any public complaints about campaign violations, ending the practice of making politicians police themselves.

Raising penalties for violating the Elections Act, up to \$25,000 for individuals and \$50,000 for corporations or trade unions.

Requiring electronic filing, putting donation and expense records online.

Working with municipalities to improve the voters list, and allowing use of data from library cards or recreation programs if individuals agree.

Requiring voters to show photo ID on voting day to reduce fraud.

Closing loopholes in fundraising rules, to prevent candidates from claiming parties for supporters or full-page self-promotional ads as "fundraising events."

"It's a good step," said Robert MacDermid, a York University professor who has analyzed the influence of donations by developers on municipal elections. "But I had hoped for something more, such as a ban on corporate or trade union donations."

MacDermid believes the influence of the development industry, especially in 905 municipalities, is "unhealthy for a democratic society," but the province is unwilling to ban corporate donations because provincial parties depend on them.

Watson said the province is also waiting to see what Toronto does with the idea.

Mayor David Miller, who declined corporate and union donations in the 2006 campaign, has pledged to bring the issue and other reforms to council before the next election.

Under the City of Toronto Act, council has the authority to implement such a ban, but it did not bring the item to council on Tuesday for a vote. Requiring municipalities to appoint audit committees to oversee campaign finance complaints takes the issue out of council's hands. If the committee found evidence that a candidate violated the rules, it could start a legal proceeding.

In Vaughan, city council has refused to audit certain politicians, forcing citizens to bring such complaints to the courts. Several politicians are currently facing charges dating to the 2006 campaign.

Councillor Tony Carella, who co-chaired a task force on revitalizing the election process in Vaughan, said the provincial proposals are all steps in the right direction. "It's all incremental. Every step makes a difference. Not every step is the magical thing," he said.

Some municipalities, such as Ajax, have already set up separate audit committees. "To have the decision made by council was problematic from a fairness point of view and from an optics point of view," said Ajax Mayor Steve Parrish. "That is a positive reform."

But Toronto Councillor Michael Walker believes an independent body should oversee complaints, arguing politicians can still stack committees.

"Judging ourselves through the appointments you make isn't going to work," Walker said.

