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Developers hail end to election gifts

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A spokesman for real-estate developers says a ban on corporate campaign gifts meant to avoid undue influence would actually come as a relief, because developers are hounded by politicians looking for cheques at election time.

That puts them on the same page as Mayor David Miller, who backs a proposal to ban both company and union donations to political candidates in Toronto's 2010 municipal election.

And Ontario's top labour leader, Wayne Samuelson, also says he supports the proposal by Councillors Michael Walker (Ward 22, St. Paul's) and Cliff Jenkins (Ward 25, Don Valley West).

"I'll support it. I've supported it in the past," Miller told reporters Friday. He did not accept corporate or union donations in the 2006 election. "Why should somebody, because they own a company, in effect be able to give twice the amount of money – one donation personally, and one through their company? That's not fair," Miller said. "It should be people who fund it."

Stephen Dupuis, who heads the Building Industry and Land Development Association, which represents property developers, says a ban is fine with him. "I don't think the development community would care if there was a rule that said they couldn't contribute," he said this week.

"The amount of solicitation letters we get from municipal politicians is just stackable," Dupuis said. "It's not that developers are pushing money out the door. It's dealing with relentless requests."

Toronto's executive committee meets Tuesday to consider the ban. The issue then moves to a special council meeting Dec. 2.

A study by York University Professor Robert MacDermid found municipal elections across Greater Toronto are largely financed by corporations, many of them developers.

The pattern varies from city to city, MacDermid found. In Toronto, corporate donations made up only 12 per cent of total contributions for city council candidates. In Pickering, by contrast, 77 per cent of contributions came from corporations, and in Vaughan, 63 per cent.

(MacDermid's study of 10 GTA municipalities tracked only donations of \$100 or more, but such donations make up more than 90 per cent of the total.) Corporate donations averaged 33 per cent of the total, while unions gave 1.4 per cent.

Toronto is the only municipality in Ontario with the power to set election spending rules. But Walker said the province, which controls election rules for other towns and cities, will be forced to act if Toronto sets an example.

Even though there's a \$750 limit on single donations, MacDermid said well-connected corporate lobbyists often bundle donations together, offering candidates a package of corporate contributions worth many thousands.

Samuelson, who heads the Ontario Federation of Labour, said it's unfair for citizens backing a councillor to be "competing with huge corporations. "There's an amazing amount of money to be made, and people will do what it takes to make that money," he said.