

Committee votes to cap corporate, union election donations

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Corporate and union donations will have no place in the 2010 municipal elections if Toronto Council goes along with the city's executive committee's recommendations.

The committee voted Tuesday, Nov. 24, to set rules for candidates in the municipal elections that would mean only individuals can contribute to campaigns. If approved by Toronto Council next week, Toronto will become the only municipality in Ontario where business and labour are both shut out of elections - at least when it comes to financing candidates.

Mayor David Miller, who accepted no corporate or union donations in 2006, championed the ban.

"From my perspective, elections are about the involvement of individuals working for the common good," said Miller.

"If you believe that then you have no choice.

Whatever way you put it, if corporations and unions are allowed to donate some people have more of a say than others. That's not right, and I don't think it's consistent with our democratic goal."

The ban would be unique to Toronto, because under the City of Toronto Act, the city is uniquely positioned to set rules regarding elections. Other municipalities are under the jurisdiction of Queen's Park - and under proposed changes to the Municipal Elections Act, those contributions aren't banned.

Toronto councillors heard from a group of citizen activists urging them to enact a ban that otherwise councillors and mayoralty candidates have only done voluntarily.

"Corporations shouldn't have undue influence on those who can run for office," said Gordon Freeman. "By banning corporate and union donations it will also force successful candidates to be those people who excel in grassroots citizen-centric fundraising - and we think that's valuable too."

Freeman presented research by York University Professor Robert McDermid, which found that municipal elections are largely financed by corporations - particularly corporations involved in the development industry.

Toronto is less reliant on corporate donations than other communities in Ontario, but he argued it made sense to simply prohibit it as a show of leadership.

"We're not suggesting corporations and unions shouldn't be a part of the electoral process - they should be engaged in debate during elections. But they should not have a role in actually putting dollars in campaign coffers."

Not everyone on the committee and at the meeting agreed a ban was a good idea.



Committee votes to cap corporate, union election donations. The city's executive committee is recommending rule changes for campaign contributions in the municipal elections. *Stock photo*

Etobicoke North Councillor Suzanne Hall said doing so implied that councillors who took union donations were on the take.

"I am not going to sell my soul for \$500 or even \$750," she said. "I think it's ridiculous to indicate that we are all corrupt, we are all criminals, that we are going to be intimidated by people who contribute to our campaigns."

Eglinton-Lawrence Councillor Howard Moscoe pointed out that banning corporations and unions from donating just means that individual CEOs and employees will be able to donate to campaigns.

Don Valley East Councillor Denzil Minnan-Wong pointed out that a sampling of donors to Miller's campaigns were city employees - and members of city unions - but not identified as such.

The committee eventually supported the recommendations, however.

Council will make a final decision at its meeting next week.

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