

Toronto closer to ban on union, corporate donations  
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Toronto's executive committee voted today to outlaw donations from corporations and unions during the 2010 campaign, just one of several pre-election reforms aimed at improving fairness.

If council approves the new political financing restrictions next week, it will make Toronto the first city in Ontario to try to minimize the influence of big developers and unions on the municipal process.

Mayor David Miller, who refused corporate and union donations during the 2006 campaign as a matter of principle, said the move puts democratic power back in the hands of voters.

"In the modern world it's up to individuals to vote and contribute to people who run for office," he said. "And it's outdated to say if you own a business, you get to contribute twice, whereas somebody who doesn't own a business only gets to contribute once, which was the effect of the old law."

Councillor Cliff Jenkins (Don Valley West), who along with councillor Michael Walker (St. Paul's) helped push the issue forward, said the reforms will improve transparency, along with other measures Toronto has undertaken, like instituting an integrity commissioner, a lobbyist register and a city ombudsman.

"It really is about reducing undue influence at city hall," he said.

But others warned the new measures would only drive corporations or special interests looking to sway decision making with money underground.

Councillor Howard Moscoe (Eglinton Lawrence) argued when corporate owners, presidents and directors as well as union executives will now make donations as individuals, which is still allowed, but it will be less apparent to the public.

"I fought my whole career to make sure campaign contributions open and transparent," he said. "I'm not about to see it go down on 'let's pretend' politics" with a vote for a "poorly thought-out, half-baked scheme."

Councillor Norm Kelly (Scarborough Agincourt) warned the law could have unintended consequences, such as favouring wealthy candidates who can bankroll their own campaigns, promoting party politics, reinforcing incumbency and fostering special interest candidacies.

The executive committee also dealt today with some other housekeeping issues in advance of next year's election that raised alarm.

A report from city clerk Ulli Watkiss indicated that efforts to ensure tenants are registered on the voters list, which is administered by provincial property assessment corporation MPAC, are falling short.

Some 250,000 tenants were left off the voters list by MPAC in the 2006 election, she said.

Ms. Watkiss outlined a \$429,000 outreach campaign her department will undertake, but the Mayor called on the clerk to beef up the plan and explore the logistics of door-to-door canvassing to register voters.

Mr. Miller called the flaws in the process "shameful."

"If a tenant sued us, they would probably win, he said, adding even as Mayor he was even left off the voters list.

Councillor Shelley Carroll (Don Valley East), the budget chief, also pledged to send a bill to MPAC to fund some of the work.

Councillors were also alerted yesterday to imminent changes to the province's election legislation that will leave them vulnerable to complaints about their election expenses, some of them potentially vexatious and politically motivated, for up to four years after the election.

Toronto will ask Queen's Park to narrow the time frame and also eliminate "double jeopardy" for complainants, which allows them to use both independent audits and the courts to challenge expense claims.

“This is a Kafkaesque situation – a Catch 22, but more Kafkaesque,” said Councillor Paula Fletcher (Toronto Danforth)