

## Council votes to ban corporate, union election donations

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Corporate and union donations won't play a role in candidates' campaigns in next fall's municipal elections, Toronto Council decided after a grueling day-long debate Wednesday. Councillors finally voted 29-12 to change the way elections are financed – a move that city councillor Michael Walker, who has been pushing for the change since 2001, called "revolutionary."

"This is kind of a revolutionary day," said Walker, standing alongside fellow councillor Cliff Jenkins after the vote.

"We've broken the dam of resistance and once it's broken and breached, the demands will carry on."

Walker and Jenkins spent the day working with a group of citizen democracy advocates, to convince a majority of councillors to make a change in the way that they fund their campaigns. Under rules used in the last election in 2006, councillor and mayoralty candidates were able to accept donations from corporations and unions up to the amount of \$750.

York University Professor of Political Science Robert McDermid and others in the group Vote Toronto have argued that the practice ought to be ended, because the evidence shows that candidates who are heavily funded by corporations – particularly those in the development industry – tend to unduly support those developers when they come before municipal councils.

They said that by providing such a rich source of donations, they effectively have the power to select who runs for office.

Better, they argued, that councillors seek small individual donations – whether from developers personally or citizens' groups.

But across the province, only politicians in Toronto are able to legislate that thanks to the City of Toronto Act. McDermid watched the vote, and was clearly overcome with emotion when councillors elected to use that power.

"This is the first time where a group of politicians have gotten together and moved a ban on corporate and union donations and I think that is huge," he said.

"It will be an example to many municipalities across Ontario who are yearning to have the same right. It's also a sign to the province that the province has to do something about this and make some serious changes to the Municipal Elections Act. It's a long battle and we're all very thankful that it's ended this way."

It was by no means clear that it would end that way.

Councillors of all political stripes raised serious objections to the plan.

Don Valley East Councillor Denzil Minnan-Wong said removing corporate and union donations from the picture would simply mean that no one would be able to tell when a donation came with strings attached.

"The tough decision is to let the public know where you're getting your donations from. The easy way is to add these donations so that donations go underground. The very thing that discourages against undue influence is transparent reporting process that requires corporate and union disclosure. This policy that is before you undermines the very thing it wants to protect," he said.

Maria Augimeri from York Centre said the ban would actually make it more difficult for candidates in poorer communities to raise money.

"Those poor and working class communities who can't contribute to a candidate will be left out in the political



**Committee votes to cap corporate, union election donations.** T city's executive committee is recommending rule changes campaign contributions in the municipal elections. *Stock photo*

cold," she said. "They will rarely be able to present a winnable campaign because they will be barred from accepting donations from unions and corporations."

The vote went back and forth through the day, said Walker.

"We've been up and down all day counting the numbers - we always thought we had it, but they were up and down. In the end, they held."

Jenkins said that many councillors were simply fearful that fundraising would become too challenging.

"It's very easy for candidates to get money from corporate interests - now it will make a lot of people have to out and do a lot of work," he said.

Walker called it more bluntly.

"It's a laziness," he said. "You get comfortable and it's hard to make change. We've made a seismic change in attitude. And if they buy into it, they'll find it exhilarating getting those smaller donations."

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