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Editorial: Province stymies city election plan

More than a year after passing a sweeping election reform package, which includes a ban on corporate and union donations, Toronto City Council faces the issue again. Why? Because a provincial government elected on a promise of democratic renewal failed to pay close attention the first time.

Despite having 13 months to revise Ontario's Municipal Elections Act, and install Toronto's reformed system, Premier Dalton McGuinty's government is still working on providing the necessary approvals. That delay means the next municipal election, set for November 2006, will almost certainly be fought under the old, unfair rules that the current Toronto City Council has voted to replace.

Under the proposed reforms, it would be easier for political newcomers to win public office. No longer would developers, unions, lobbyists, contractors, corporations and other vested interests be allowed to stuff incumbents' campaign war chests beyond the point of overflowing. Cash lavished on posh parties for supporters and on glitzy fundraising drives would no longer be exempt from campaign spending limits. And incumbents would be blocked from raising huge sums — far more than they could legally spend — and banking the money for future campaigns.

Under new rules, approved by councillors but never acted upon by the provincial government, these unspent surpluses would be rolled into the city's budget. About \$1 million would have poured into Toronto's cobwebbed coffers had that provision been in place for the last election.

This week, in an effort to gain the province's attention, councillor Michael Walker is bringing a notice of motion on campaign financing to city council. Councillors are being asked to send a message to Queen's Park by reaffirming their commitment to reform and demanding action from the McGuinty government. That measure deserves unanimous support.

In what has become an all too rare occurrence in politics, a majority of city councillors last year cast self-interest aside and approved an election package that actually hurt their chances of re-election. They put the public good ahead of their own political gain. They need to do it again by voting for Walker's motion and prodding the province into motion.

Queen's Park's inertia is disappointing coming from a government that had campaigned on a platform calling for steps that would ease the corrosive influence of money on politics. The reform package approved, so long ago by Toronto City Council, is fully in keeping with that goal.

Local electoral reform isn't a high priority at Queen's Park. At the same time, though, there was little push from Toronto councillors, some of whom may have voted for the package but quietly hoped it would not be implemented until after the next election.

There was a time when McGuinty described restoring the public's confidence and trust in politics as

the main legacy he wanted to leave with Ontario. That was before he won the last election. Now other matters hold his attention; other issues loom larger on the government agenda.

But McGuinty had it right the first time. Government has no more fundamental role than to serve democratic principles, bring fairness where there is bias and protect the public's trust in the system. Councillors must remind McGuinty of that duty by demanding action on election reform.

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