

Legislation Text

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**To the President and Members of
the City Council of Philadelphia:**

I am herewith returning to you as disapproved Bill Number 030562, which would establish local campaign contribution limits for candidates for Mayor or City Council, cap the total amount of money a candidate may receive from political committees during off-years, and allow a candidate to pledge to limit total campaign expenditures per election.

I cannot stress strongly enough that my Administration supports comprehensive, meaningful and effective campaign finance reform. It is impossible not to be conscious of the cynicism in our electorate about the power of money in politics and the overall cost of elections. Unfortunately, this bill will not reduce the cost of local elections and it is rife with consequences that will do little to advance the public's faith in elected officials. To efficiently address the complex challenge of campaign finance reform, Council and the Mayor together should rise above the need for a symbolic short-term political response and work toward real reform. Reform that has a real chance to limit the influence of money in politics, reduce the cost of elections and insure that the public has easy access to the information it needs to make informed judgments. During elections, the public gets most of its information from television, radio and direct mail. These expenses drive the increasing cost of elections. Because Bill 030562 falls far short of achieving comprehensive, effective and meaningful reform I cannot support this legislation.

The quarter century struggle with federal campaign finance reform highlights the complexity of this issue and proves that limiting direct contributions to candidates is ineffective. Campaign contribution limits for federal elections have existed since the mid-1970's, when Congress made sweeping amendments to the Federal Election Campaign Act, still many United States Senate and Congressional races cost more than \$20 million, and President Bush has already amassed more than \$100 million to support his re-election bid. If our goal is meaningful campaign finance reform, we must do more than adopt a variation of a federal model that has failed.

Last year, Congress attempted to implement new reforms through the Campaign Reform Act of 2002 (also known as “McCain-Feingold”). Among other things, that law tries to limit the use of “soft money” in federal elections. Federal candidates already are circumventing the new law’s limitations by using state political party organizations to do work previously done by national parties. Soft money has not gone away, it has just found a new home.

Each of us - as candidates - knows all too well that the time required to raise money keeps increasing, but we also know that to remain competitive and discourage competition, we will put in the time required to fund our campaigns. I wish it were different, but it isn’t. One of the biggest frustrations I hear from federal elected officials is the time they spend raising money, because of the increasing cost of pursuing elected office, combined with low contribution limits. But the Presidential candidates who have waived public matching funds are classic, current examples that the need for money drives the process. Bill Number 030562 will not reduce the cost of local elections, but it will increase the time spent by candidates raising the money required to win election or re-election.

Bill Number 030562 also misses the mark because it can be easily circumvented, and it limits the Mayor’s ability to protect the legitimate political interests of the city. Although the bill is well intended, it simply shifts influence from large contributors to power brokers, prolific fund raisers, independent political committees, state elected officials, individuals with personal wealth and political parties. The most egregious result is that the bill inevitably will encourage the creation of independent political committees that can spend unlimited amounts of money influencing local elections, a powerful incentive for candidates to evade the contribution limits by collaborating with political committees that appear independent on the surface.

Finally, if the Mayor is going to be a force in national and state politics, he/she must be able to support candidates that advocate statewide and national policies that aid the city. This legislation would negatively impact the Mayor while not impacting other elected officials with competing agendas.

I recognize other municipalities have adopted campaign finance reform measures. But it is important to note that the Committee of Seventy, having reviewed such efforts in other cities, remains “skeptical that contribution limits will be effective.” Rather than living with a defective piece of legislation, I would ask City Council to join me to work to adopt state legislation that works. That legislation must include stronger disclosure laws. Additionally, broadcast media and direct mail outlets must make a greater commitment if we are ever going to succeed in reducing the cost of elections. Without their cooperation, the cost of elections will continue to spiral.

Campaign finance reform is an extraordinarily important issue but it is ill-suited to local, piecemeal change. I do not believe that the cause of campaign finance reform is advanced by Bill 030562. The short term symbolic gesture will turn to frustration with the next more expensive round of local public elections.

Sincerely,

John F. Street, Esquire
Mayor