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Monday, January 7, 2008

Posted on Mon, Jan 7, 2008

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Campaign financing is about to hit the fan

By Gregory B. Hladky, Capitol Bureau Chief

Hold onto your hats and your wallets, Connecticut taxpayers. This state is about to go on what could be a wild ride into the uncharted realms of public financing for legislative campaigns.

The 2008 legislative election will be an experiment, a test run before public campaign financing takes effect in 2010 for Connecticut's major statewide offices such as governor and attorney general.

The public campaign financing bill that won approval in November 2005 was the result of years of lobbying by good government activist groups looking to limit the influence of big-money special interests on Connecticut's election process.

Democrats also had pushed for public campaign financing, but only for major statewide elective offices. They had no interest in disrupting the legislative campaign funding system, which relied on contributions from special interest political action committees. It was that system Democrats had used to achieve super majority control of both the state House and Senate.

But Democrats' hands were forced when Republican Gov. M. Jodi Rell Advertisement made a dramatic offer to support campaign financing as long as it also included legislative offices.

The reform plan that eventually passed banned contributions from lobbyists and state contractors and, for the first time, set limits on contributions so-called "unlimited" PACs could make to candidates.

Participation in the public financing scheme is voluntary and requires candidates to abide by specified spending limits.

Under the plan, candidates in regular state Senate primary contests would get state grants of \$35,000, while state House primary contestants would receive \$10,000. However, primary contestants in districts where one party or the other is dominant could qualify for additional public funding.

For the general election campaign, a Senate candidate will get \$85,000 for a contested race while a House candidate gets \$25,000.

Even unopposed candidates can qualify for public grants of up to \$25,500 for a Senate district and \$7,500 for a House district, which is nice money for a politician with no one to run against.

According to GOP officials, some skeptical Republican candidates have already decided to go their own way and not bother with the public financing program.

There are some restrictions in the new law that candidates can't use the money to pay their wife or other close family members. But Republican critics like state House Minority Leader Lawrence F. Cafero Jr., R-Norwalk, claim spending loopholes in the law are massive and dangerous.

Another problem is that, although the state will distribute millions of public dollars to candidates, the law doesn't include any tough new penalties for misuse of that money.

Policing of the new system is being left up to the state Elections Enforcement Commission, a panel that has a history of being reluctant to crack down on sitting lawmakers or the governor.

Some lawmakers say they want to put in criminal penalties for campaign finance violators and to require tough enforcement. But chances of that passing in this legislative election year are slim and none.

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