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Editorial | Island Voices

Hawaii Election Campaign Fund needs refill

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The Hawaii Election Campaign Fund (HECF) is in danger of being depleted.

Recent projections by the Hawaii Campaign Spending Commission predict that the fund may not be sufficient to sustain Hawaii's Partial Public Financing Program, by as early as December 2017, affecting candidates who depend on public financing in 2018.

The Campaign Spending Commission itself may have to cease operations by 2019, if the Legislature refuses to restore its funding.

Why should you care?

Since Citizens United, the 2010 U.S. Supreme Court decision that opened the floodgates for unlimited spending by Super PACs, citizens' voices are being drowned out by special-interest money.

Super PACs or independent expenditure committees are allowed to raise and spend unlimited amounts of money as long as they do not coordinate their activities with candidates or political parties. During the 2014 election, 29 Super PACs spent nearly \$8 million trying to influence our state and county races. In today's pay-to-play environment, transparency and the ability to "follow the money" is more crucial than ever.

The Campaign Spending Commission is the watchdog state agency that works to safeguard the integrity and transparency of our state and local political campaigns. In

addition to administering Hawaii's Partial Public Financing Program, the commission enforces Hawaii's campaign spending laws, such as ensuring campaign contribution limits are not exceeded, and that disclosure reports, which provide information regarding campaign contributions, donors and expenditures, are filed correctly and on time.

Through its online database, the commission provides the public access to information regarding candidates', PACs' and Super PACs' campaign finances.

Partial Public Financing is a voluntary program, where qualified political candidates raise small amounts of money from the public that the state then matches, up to a certain amount, via the HECF.

The program allows more candidates to run for office, and lets them spend more time on policy and less time on fundraising.

In 1978, the people of Hawaii directed the Legislature to create a fund "to be used for partial public financing of campaigns of the State." In response, the HECF was created in 1979. However, the HECF's purpose was later altered by the Legislature to also fund the commission's operating expenses.

Prior to this, like many other state agencies, the commission's operating expenses were paid for by the general fund.

The HECF is now overburdened and can no longer support both Public Financing and the Campaign Spending Commission's operating expenses. Once the fund is depleted, Hawaii will lose two critical components for keeping money's influence on politics in check.

What can you do?

Tell your legislators to support House Bill 2156 and Senate Bill 2438 this session. Both bills would require the commission's operating expenses to be funded by the general fund instead of the HECF, and appropriates funds to the commission for its operating expenses.

Remind your legislators that the HECF should be used to exclusively fund a Public Financing program, as was originally mandated by the people of Hawaii.

Additionally, if you are a Hawaii taxpayer who wants "citizen owned" versus "special-interest owned" elections, make your voice heard by marking "yes" on your state tax return for \$3 (\$6 if married and filing jointly) to go to the HECF.

The \$3 (or \$6) will be designated to the HECF from the general fund. Marking "Yes" on your tax return will not increase your tax or reduce your refund.

Together we can increase transparency and ensure that our elections and government reflect the will of the people and not deep-pocketed special interests.

