



Analyzing the 2016 Baltimore City Elections

What the Candidates Spent and Where It Came From

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Overview - The High Cost to Run

The cost to run for office in Baltimore City rose over steeply in the last five years – 25% for the Mayor’s race, and over 50% for Council races. This spike in campaign costs is both a reflection of the changing campaign landscape and a call to action for stronger state laws and enforcement.

The 2016 Baltimore mayoral campaign was the most expensive in decades. A fierce primary battle between Democratic nominee Catherine Pugh and Sheila Dixon left the city “battered,” according to *The Washington Post*. And the rising cost to run reflects that. In 2007, mayoral candidate Sheila Dixon spent

\$2,268,824 to take the city. In 2011, with the housing and jobs market still in the grips of the Great Recession, Stephanie Rawlings-Blake spent just slightly less – \$2,224,609 – to win the mayoral election. Finally, in 2016, Catherine Pugh spent \$2,790,447.

City Council races have seen an even more significant rise in costs. In 2016, the average cost to run for Council was \$185,588 – \$63,156 more than the average cost in 2011. The cost to run varied significantly across districts. The Council President campaign in 2016 cost \$797,634, while other candidates spent between \$48,271 (in District 10) and \$271,872 (in District 11). Winning Council candidates in all but one district raised more in 2016 than 2011. The Council President raised 47.5% more than in 2011; the Council average for the district races increased a whopping 52%.

The increase in funds is not coming from growth in the number of small-dollar donors, but rather a staggering increase in the average donation to mayoral campaigns. The average donation size to winning mayoral candidates has increased from \$525 in 2007 to \$681 in 2011, then nearly doubled to \$1,119 in 2016. In other words: More wealthy donors are donating more, whether as individuals, from businesses, or through PACs.

These numbers are significant, especially as Baltimore City may act as a bellwether for county campaign costs. In 2014 in Baltimore County, for example, County Executive Kamenetz spent \$1,117,789 on his campaign. This year, contenders for that race have committed to raising twice that amount.

What is troubling about these rising expenses is not just the amount of money being spent, but where that money comes from. Recent Supreme Court decisions have paved the way for wealthy donors to donate more. While the decision in *Citizens United* is most often cited by advocates as opening the floodgates to independent spending in elections, the decision in *McCutcheon v. FEC* will arguably have a far greater impact on state elections – an impact beginning to show in the 2016 races. The 2014 Supreme Court decision voided limits on the total amount donors can give to all candidates in an election cycle – including the aggressive \$10,000 limit that existed in Maryland. With the aggregate limits gone, a major donor can give, and give, and give again, to as many campaign entities as he or she chooses.

While there is little Maryland can do to counter *McCutcheon*, the state can take action to close loopholes that let wealthy donors further abuse campaign limits. Analysis of the donors in the 2016 elections reveals troubling cases of individuals abusing loopholes to maximize their donations. Whether a real estate developer using Limited Liability Companies (LLCs) to break the \$6,000 individual gift limit, or a pesticide magnate using weak rules around loans to give a candidate a quick \$30,000, the data shows that if there is a weakness in our laws, a donor will find it and use it.

Unless significant changes are made in how we fund our elections, campaigns will only continue to rise in cost. As long as candidates are struggling to compete on a playing field dominated by major donors and special interests, the game will favor those donors who can afford to play by those rules. The loopholes in our campaign finance laws must be closed, but that will only go so far. Baltimore City, and Maryland as a whole, must explore further-reaching reforms. Programs such as citizen funded elections (which are being run in Montgomery County this cycle) allow candidates to run on small-dollar donations, reducing the influence of major donors and special interests.

Methodology

This report is primarily based on publicly available campaign finance reports available at the Maryland Campaign Finance Reporting Information System (MD-CRIS).¹ Common Cause Maryland research

¹ campaignfinance.md.us

associate Aaron Boxerman downloaded the campaign contributions and loans for all 2016 mayoral candidates who were contenders in the general election, and all winning City Council candidates, using a date range of January 1, 2014 through November 9, 2016. He then categorized the contributions, sorted, and found totals for giving by type of donor. The same data was pulled for mayoral candidates who ran in the general elections in 2011 and 2007.

When cross-checking LLCs, CCMD sorted them by address to find which addresses had multiple LLCs listing that address for donations. We then looked up those LLCs in the Maryland Corporate Registration Database (M-DAT) to see whether they were registered. For those that were, we noted the date of incorporation and the resident agent listed; those that were not in the database were tagged as suspicious. CCMD also used Google Maps to crosscheck addresses for fake LLCs, as well as Streetview to assess whether office buildings existed at that location. This report also used reporting by *The Baltimore Sun*, *The Baltimore Business Journal*, and *Baltimore Brew* to provide background information on specific donations and donors.

The Hottest Real Estate in Baltimore City

Here are some of the biggest players in the 2016 Baltimore mayoral race: an empty building in Lanham, MD from which several companies – some bankrupt, few with any internet presence – ostensibly operate; a shell company in downtown Baltimore’s Little Italy;² and unregistered corporations with no public records funneling thousands of dollars to candidates from P.O. boxes in Timonium, MD.

Limited Liability Companies have long been a problem for Maryland’s campaigns. Until 2013, these entities operated completely outside of normal campaign laws. An individual who owned several LLCs could donate to campaigns through each one as though they were unrelated entities, even though if they were created as traditional corporations, their giving would be treated as a single entity, and the owner would only be able to maximize donations once across all of them. In 2013, the state legislature passed a comprehensive campaign finance reform that attempted to close this LLC loophole.³ But Baltimore’s experience in 2016 shows that this law needs to be strengthened.

LLC spending has only increased over the last few election cycles, from \$368,169 (2007) to \$428,349 (2011) to \$557,770 (2016). A quick scan through the campaign filings of Mayor Pugh and 2016 runner-up Sheila Dixon reveals LLC after LLC. Pugh received \$372,480 during the campaign from LLCs; Dixon received \$184,470.



This increase in LLC spending is surprising, given that legislation treating LLCs as single entities was widely expected to decrease their expenditures. While giving from an LLC, up to the \$6,000 threshold, is

² <http://www.citypaper.com/blogs/the-news-hole/bcpnews-little-italy-fundraiser-funnels-money-to-pugh-20160222-story.html>

³ <http://mgaleg.maryland.gov/2013RS/bills/hb/hb1499e.pdf>

legal, the continued rise in expenditures creates two concerns: first, that LLCs that share common ownership or control are not obeying the law and continue to donate above the legal limits; and, second, that individuals are creating fake LLCs for the intent of making campaign donations, which is strictly illegal under campaign finance law.

Discovering the truth is tricky due to the very nature of LLCs. These entities are designed to do what their names say: *limit liability*. Even the State Board of Elections is not empowered to know who owns or controls an LLC, making it almost impossible to show when an owner or operator is violating the law. This enables individuals who possess LLCs to continue using the entities to pump money into candidate campaigns, evading campaign finance restrictions even as the donors remain secure behind the scenes.

Short of alleging misconduct and opening a formal investigation, it is nearly impossible to get to the bottom of these companies. Combine that with the sheer number of donations by LLCs - some legitimate, others potentially not – and filing an investigation against each case would generate a workload far beyond regulators' current capacity.

For this report, Common Cause Maryland analyzed hundreds of LLCs, comparing names, addresses, and resident agents.⁴ Our finding was that – in several cases – the behavior of LLCs was concerning and necessitates further investigation. The following are a few examples of the most egregious actors.

Case #1: Let Them Eat Escrow

According to publicly available corporate and campaign finance records, a single unit – 100 Painters Mill Road, Suite 200, Owings Mills, MD – donated \$23,000 to a single mayoral candidate during the campaign. The unit appears to be the legitimate office of Residential Title and Escrow, a development firm based in Owings Mills.

Residential maxed out their donation cap with a \$6,000 donation at the end of June 2016. The remaining \$17,000 came from 6 LLCs listed at that same office. The shared address raises significant red flags regarding control of the numerous entities.

One of the donations, \$8,000 from the Halp Ridgely Water and Sewer Utility Company LLC, is all by itself a violation of the individual limit. If these entities share ownership or control, then the violation is much greater. The number provided online for the Halp Ridgely LLC did not answer Common Cause Maryland's calls. Indeed, the company seems to have no online presence whatsoever, besides an automatically generated Facebook page.

An additional \$9,000 came from another three LLCs, all of which listed the executive vice president of Residential Title & Escrow, Howard Perlow, as resident agent. According to campaign finance records, these LLCs were all located at 1829 Reisterstown Rd, Suite 380, Baltimore, MD 21208. Perlow has been described as the “mastermind” behind “the highlight [event] of Baltimore’s developer-politician social season.”⁵

There may be more LLCs with similar connections to Residential Title & Escrow and its agents. But because the Maryland corporate database and the campaign finance database are not linked, it is difficult to trace connections between resident agents.

⁴ *Resident agent*: the individual who signs the articles of organization for a given LLC. This information is publicly available in Maryland's Corporate Database at: <http://charter.dat.maryland.gov/>

⁵ <https://www.baltimorebrew.com/2014/05/21/dancing-the-night-away-in-vegas/>

Case #2: Mark Sapperstein, Developer Extraordinaire

LLCs can be used to shield a donor as well as enable that individual to avoid individual donation limits.

A quick Google search of Mark Sapperstein reveals success after success. The real estate developer, a native of Pikesville, has enjoyed a long and successful career in the Baltimore area.⁶ Despite being active in political donations, his giving has never been quite out in the open.

As the *Baltimore Brew* noted after the 2011 elections, “Don’t expect to see Sapperstein’s name (or those of his partners) attached to any of his contributions. Instead, he uses the names of his various LLCs to mask his generous spirit.”⁷

Sapperstein may have continued to give at high levels throughout the 2016 mayoral campaign. His individual donations amount to roughly \$4,000 to a single candidate. But four separate LLCs, all of which list him as resident agent and are tied to properties he owns, donated a collective \$14,000 *in a single day* to that same candidate. The LLCs also donated \$3,000 to her opponent, highlighting the ability of wealthy donors to hedge bets and ensure some level of access no matter an election’s outcome.

Again, the total number of LLCs that he owns, and potentially used to channel funds to candidates for office, remains unknown.

Case #3: From Timonium, With Love

Mailboxes donated almost \$56,000 to mayoral candidates over the course of the 2016 campaign. Or rather, the LLCs that ostensibly ran out of these P.O. boxes did.

P.O. Box LLCs donated \$50,300 to Catherine Pugh and \$5,610 to Sheila Dixon. The Green Party nominee, Joshua Harris, received \$25 from a mailbox LLC. These entities have no physical presence in Maryland beyond their mailbox, raising concerns over their legitimacy. If they were formed not as a legitimate business but rather solely to donate to campaigns, that is a clear violation of Maryland campaign finance law.

Cellular Systems and Signage LLC has been donating to Maryland Democratic candidates for years. Established around 2014 – although the company is not registered as an LLC with the State of Maryland – Cellular has donated \$54,000 to Democratic candidates in just three years.

True Q LLC has a record of sending \$23,250 to Democratic candidates from its mailbox over the last seven years. This included a \$6,000 donation to a mayoral candidate in 2016. The entity lists real estate developer K. Mark Puente as its resident agent. Interestingly, Puente does not list True Q LLC among his businesses on LinkedIn, and a Google search for the company brings up only campaign finance donations and one charitable donation. Incidentally, Puente may also have violated individual campaign finance limits – campaign finance records show \$11,000 in individual giving to one candidate during the campaign.

True Q LLC is, at least, registered with the state. SCATM LLC, another postal LLC, appears to be fake – there is no record of it in the Maryland SDAT business entity lookup. The LLC hit the \$6,000 limit in donations to one mayoral candidate in 2016. There have been no prior or subsequent contributions by any entity registered under that name in the Maryland campaign finance database.

⁶ “Move over J.P. Grant and Michael Beatty, there’s a new high roller in town.”
<https://www.baltimorebrew.com/2015/02/18/move-over-j-p-grant-and-michael-beatty-theres-a-new-high-roller-in-town/>

⁷ id

Another P.O. box in Ellicott City donated yet another \$6,000 to a mayoral candidate in the name of SKC Investors LLC. The tactic was the same: hit the limit and run. An unregistered entity, supposedly an LLC, donating thousands from a mailbox – never to be heard from again. This money is effectively untraceable by state election officials.

Case #4: Craig Colton's Cache of Companies

Craig Colton, a lawyer and real estate developer with Caves Valley Partners in Owings Mills, MD, is associated with many LLCs. Common Cause Maryland located five of them, but there may be others. The LLCs alone – almost all of them operating out of the same address and apartment number – donated \$12,000 to a single candidate's mayoral campaign. Colton also donated \$4,000 as an individual donor to the same candidate's PAC.

Although it is quite possible that Colton does not own the LLCs for which he is a resident agent, the \$16,000 associated with his name in campaign donations raises significant red flags.

Loans and Slates

The Pugh campaign incurred at least \$150,000 to 200,000 in debt after the primary in April.⁸ That debt was repaid through three mechanisms: loans, LLCs, and slates. All three raise concerns for Common Cause Maryland.

If LLCs are poorly regulated (as previously discussed), loans to candidate committees are practically unregulated. The most high-profile example arose in the 2014 gubernatorial race, when then-candidate Antony Brown accepted a \$500,000 loan – and the campaign was not able to pay it back in a timely manner.⁹ But the lack of regulation around loans is a problem at every level. Research released by Common Cause Maryland analyzing state legislative races showed the prevalence of self-loans by those candidates.¹⁰ And the 2016 city race shows that loans, and debt, are a problem for Baltimore as well.

Loans carry risks. They are, essentially, a gamble that you are going to win – and that, once you win, enough people will fund you to ensure you can repay the loan. Failure to repay transforms the loan into a donation, which means loans over \$6,000 run the risk of becoming illegal contributions.

The use of loans also inflates the overall cost of campaigns. Over the course of the race, the Pugh campaign accepted \$335,000 in loans: \$100,000 from Baltimore County Victory Slate, \$75,000 from developer Stan Udhiri, \$50,000 from pesticides magnate Walter Tilley, \$50,000 from Stephen Burch, \$30,000 from Keith Timmons – Pugh's campaign treasurer – and \$30,000 that Pugh loaned to herself. It is important to note that all of these loans have already been fully repaid. But \$335,000 represents 12% of the candidate's total fundraising, a definite impact on the total expenses of the 2016 cycle.

A candidate going into debt can create opportunities for major donors and special interests to increase their influence. The Pugh campaign debt was primarily paid down through a fundraiser that brought in \$336,625.¹¹ Interestingly, \$50,500 of that money came from LLCs – including a number of dubious entities previously discussed in this report, including True Q LLC and its resident agent K.M. Puente, RA DM LLC, and H & J Investments I.

⁸ <https://www.baltimorebrew.com/2016/06/10/pugh-to-hold-fundraiser-to-pay-off-campaign-debt/>

⁹ <http://www.baltimoresun.com/bs-md-brown-loan-20141114-story.html>

¹⁰ <https://medium.com/@CommonCauseMD/campaigns-in-maryland-what-does-it-take-to-win-5951f6156f8>

¹¹ <https://www.baltimorebrew.com/2016/06/29/pugh-seeks-to-pay-off-campaign-debts-tonight/>

The \$100,000 from the Baltimore County Victory Slate is worth noting, as the role of slate accounts is somewhat unique to Maryland campaign finance law. As the Commission to Study Campaign Finance Law noted in their 2012 report, “there are few effective constraints on the formation and operation of slates.”¹² Transfers between candidate accounts and slate accounts are not subject to the \$6,000 limit, allowing for unlimited movement of funds between the slate account and the candidates. Furthermore, the slate is not required to report which candidates benefit by direct expenditures from the slate. Indeed, the Baltimore County Victory Slate has been fined for making the loan to Pugh, who was not officially a member of the slate at the time of the transfer. Clearly, further slate and loan reform are needed.

Organized Labor Fights Locally – and Anonymously

City Council races saw a large influx of organized money from labor unions. Analysis done by Common Cause Maryland found a -0.8 correlation between donations from LLCs and donations from groups officially designated as labor unions in city council races. In other words, as donations to a candidate from big business went up, labor union donations went down sharply - and vice versa. Few winning candidates managed to strike a balance between donations from the two, and most showed sharp polarization in their donations.

The high level of activity by unions in the council races makes their absence from the mayoral races striking. Pugh, Dixon, Harris, and Walden combined received just over \$30,000 in direct donations from organized labor. This was less than one-eighth of one percent of total direct contributions to their campaigns, and under half of the amount donated by unions to Stephanie Rawlings-Blake in 2011.

What is troubling about this trend is the likelihood that unions, instead of making direct contributions to the mayoral candidates, spent their money almost exclusively through an independent expenditure entity. “Clean Slate Baltimore” was an Independent Expenditure (IE) committee that spent more than \$623,000 on communications and marketing to defeat Dixon. Another IE committee funded by labor, the Mobilization Project, raised \$225,000 to support Dixon.

Independent spenders – including IEs, Political Action Committees (PACs), and Super PACs – were fueled by the *Citizens United* decision, which enabled them to spend unlimited amounts so long as they don’t coordinate that spending with any candidate. These entities are on the rise in Maryland, with a growing presence in both state and local races. With the limits on aggregate giving erased by the *McCutcheon v. FEC* decision, major donors are now free to give to these outside spenders as well as to candidates. Entities like Clean Slate Baltimore may well become a more frequent presence in Maryland campaigns.

Recommendations

If past is prologue, the troubling trends in the city elections of 2016 will certainly play out in the statewide elections in 2018. There are strong steps that the Maryland legislature can take to address these concerns, and ensure that campaigns in Maryland are transparent and accountable:

- 1) **Ban corporate donations.** Federal election law and 20 states across the country (from Alaska to Texas to Pennsylvania) prohibit corporations from donating directly to candidates. Maryland should hold itself to the same standard. Del. Moon advanced this proposal as part of HB 376 during the 2017 legislative session.
- 2) **Connect Maryland’s campaign donation database to Maryland’s corporate database.** Linking the campaign finance database with Maryland’s corporate database would allow regulators to quickly and easily flag suspicious donations from LLCs. Cross-referencing the two databases

¹² <http://mgaleg.maryland.gov/Pubs/CommTFWorkgrp/2012-Campaign-Finance-Law-Final-Report.pdf>

would allow suspect donations – such as those incorrectly reported, or those from fake LLCs – to be quickly and easily discovered. Del. Nick Mosby has recommended this, and Common Cause firmly believes that this reform is critical to ensuring that special interests are acting within the letter of the law.

- 3) **Require LLCs to File Owner Information.** Building on a policy Del. Lafferty submitted in 2016¹³ that would require LLC owners to have in-state company representatives file with the state, we propose requiring each LLC to list at least one owner. This way, regulators could quickly identify overlapping ownership and spot problematic donations.
- 4) **Set stronger standards for loans to campaign accounts.** The campaign culture that incentivizes loans inflates the cost of running for office and puts candidates at risk, as loans to candidates, if not repaid, have the potential to become a violation of state campaign finance limits. Two pieces of legislation attempted to crack down on loans during the 2017 legislative session: HB 551, sponsored by Del. Cluster, that would limit loans to either self-funding or financial institutions, and SB 259, sponsored by Sen. Bates, that would shorten the timeframe for repayment.
- 5) **Limit the amount of funds political slates can transfer to candidates.** While the state caps individual donations at \$6,000 per candidate per election cycle, slates aren't subject to the same regulations – and when the slate makes expenditures directly, there is no way to know which candidate they are spending their resources on. With so much money and so little oversight, slates – like LLCs – provide an ideal way for special interests to potentially exceed campaign finance limits. Common Cause Maryland supports the recommendations of the 2013 Commission to Study Campaign Finance Law, which recommended limiting transfers to \$6,000 and requiring disclosure of which members of a slate benefit from each expenditure.
- 6) **Increase opportunities for public funding of Maryland elections.** Citizen Funded Election programs, such as the ones created by Montgomery and Howard Counties, allow candidates to run for office on small dollar donations from everyday people, matched from the public fund. These donations are strictly regulated, ensuring the candidates only accept small donations from real people. These programs allow more candidates to run for office, and reduce the influence of special interests in our campaigns. Common Cause Maryland firmly believes that these programs are needed for all candidates – at the local, municipal, and state levels.

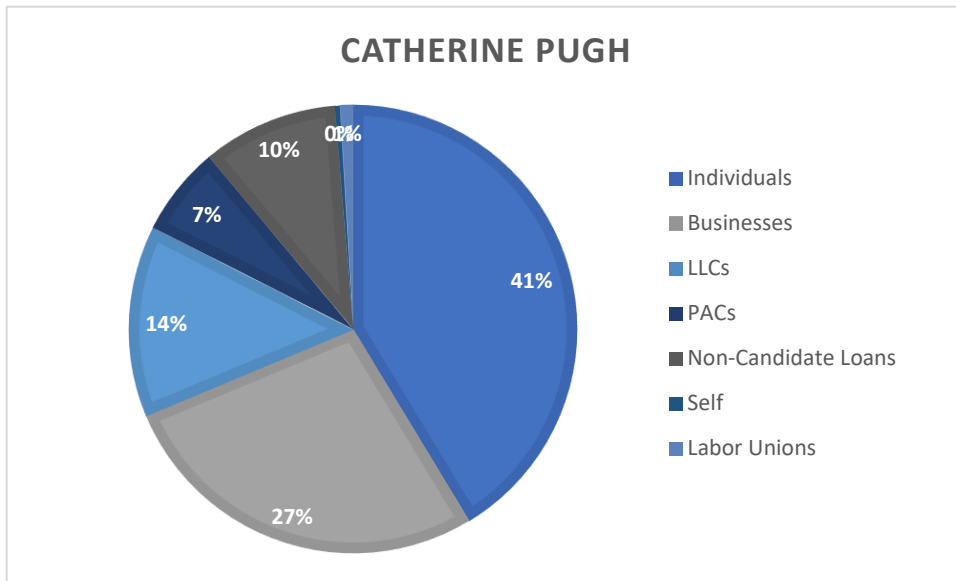
These reforms will not happen without broad public support. It is critical that people across Maryland get engaged and call for reform. Voting, contacting elected officials, and researching more about these issues and reforms are the key to changing the system. Together, we can make our democratic institutions more responsive and accountable to the people.

¹³ <http://mgaleg.maryland.gov/2016RS/bills/hb/hb0201f.pdf>

Appendix: Candidate Profiles; Who Got How Much From Where?

Mayoral Candidates

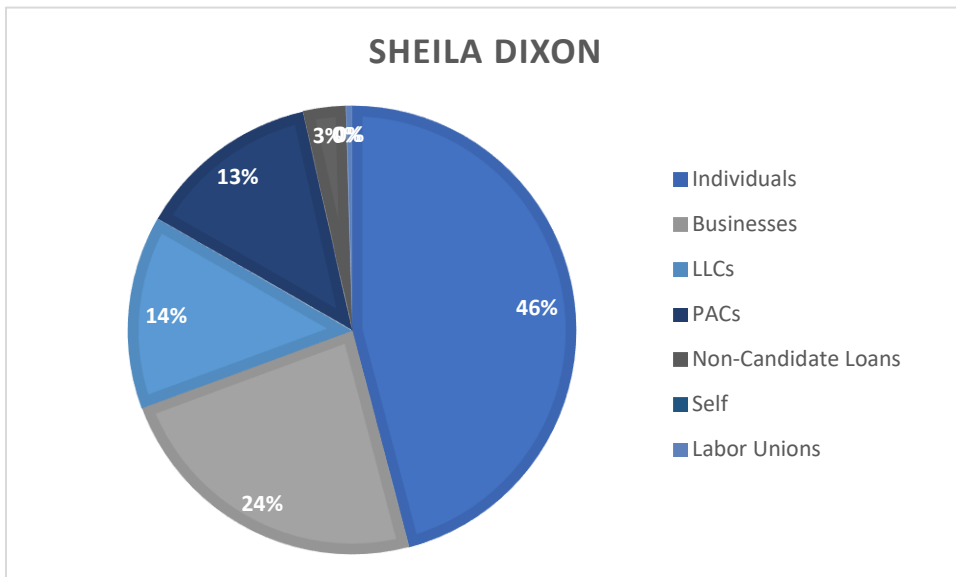
Catherine Pugh (Democrat)



Individuals	\$1,117,688
Businesses	\$740,530.00
LLCs	\$372,480.40
PACs	\$174,735
Non-Candidate Loans	\$265,000
Self	\$10,000
Labor Unions	\$24,500
Total	\$2,790,447

82% of individual donations came from 361 donors making donations of \$1,000 or more, totaling \$918,034. Only 18% came from donors giving less than \$1,000.

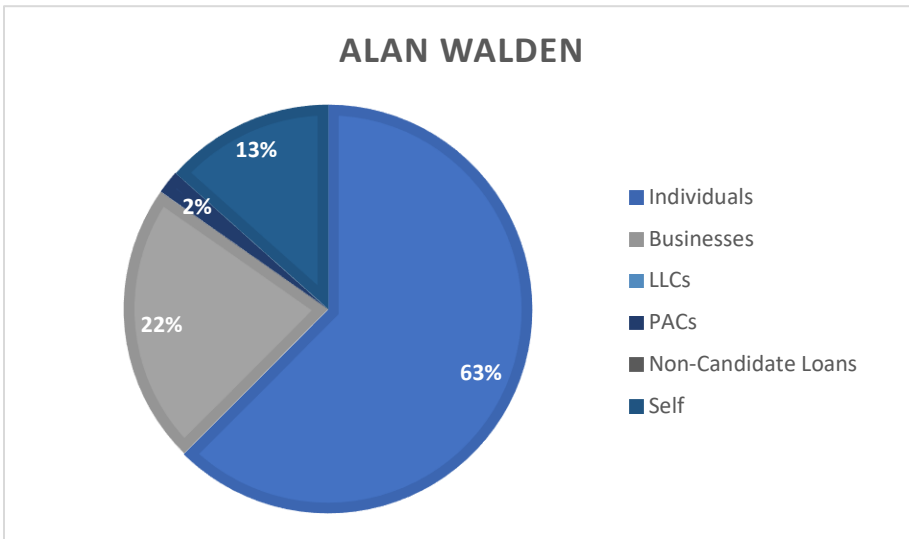
Sheila Dixon (Democrat, Write-In)



Individuals	\$608,801.72
Businesses	\$311,136
LLCs	\$184,470
PACs	\$174,735
Non-Candidate Loans	\$41,085
Self	\$400
Labor Unions	\$5,522.6
Total	\$1,326,150

The average individual donation was \$311; the median donation was \$50. 69% of individual contributions, a total of \$418,015, came from 174 donors giving \$1,000 or more.

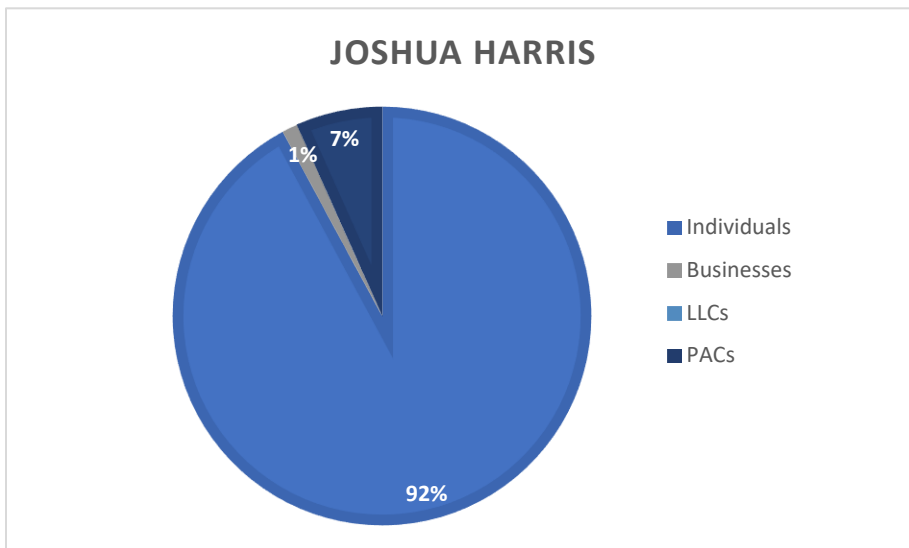
Alan Walden (Republican)



Individuals	\$8,385
Self	\$1,803
Businesses	\$2,985
PACs	\$250
Total	\$13,423

The average individual donation was \$210; the median donation was \$100. Not a single donor hit the \$6,000 individual spending cap.

Joshua Harris (Green Party)



Individuals	\$32,652
PACs	\$2,350
Businesses	\$434.88
Total	\$35,437

The average individual donation was \$49.15; the median donation was \$25.

LLC Giving Over Time

2007	2011	2016
\$246,982.48 (Dixon)	\$319,248.20 (Rawlings-Blake)	\$372,480 (Pugh)
\$71,105 (Mitchell)	\$67,735 (Pugh)	\$184,470 (Dixon)
\$1,270 (Pundley)	\$8,533.75 (Rolley)	\$795 (Walden)
\$1,700 (Carter)	\$6,550 (Landers)	\$25 (Harris)
\$321,057.48 ('07 USD)	\$402,066.95 ('11 USD)	\$557,770 ('16 USD)
\$368,168.88 ('16 USD)	\$428,348.90 ('16 USD)	\$557,770 ('16 USD)

City Council Candidates

Seat	Total	Individual	Labor	Business/Group/ Organization	Candidate Committee/ Political Clubs/ Slates	PAC	Self
Council President	\$797,634	\$218,050	\$15,250	\$564,334			
District 1	\$268,551	\$175,785		\$92,659			\$107
District 2	\$107,332	\$31,332	\$17,750	\$41,675	\$16,575		
District 3	\$176,670	\$119,563	\$20,350	\$26,087	\$7,220	\$3,250	\$200
District 4	\$154,096	\$59,354	\$34,650	\$34,325	\$22,017	\$3,750	
District 5	\$142,638	\$82,542		\$47,117	\$9,825	\$3,100	\$54
District 6	\$97,297	\$19,679		\$40,725	\$25,369	\$11,524	
District 7	\$98,603	\$33,205		\$38,640	\$16,258	\$10,500	
District 8	\$89,882	\$34,529	\$42,688	\$3,605	\$8,910		\$150
District 9	\$129,598	\$45,022	\$48,150	\$22,085	\$7,591		\$6,750
District 10	\$217,748	\$38,150	\$4,150	\$175,448			
District 11	\$271,872	\$110,297	\$9,650	\$111,325	\$7,550	\$33,050	
District 12	\$48,721	\$8,065	\$14,000	\$13,676	\$12,030		\$950
District 13	\$107,628	\$46,149	\$41,848	\$12,845	\$6,686		\$100
District 14	\$75,557	\$38,427	\$23,225	\$13,405		\$500	

Additional Information

Founded in 1974, Common Cause Maryland is a nonpartisan, grassroots organization dedicated to restoring the core values of American democracy, reinventing an open, honest and accountable government that works in the public interest, and empowering ordinary people to make their voices heard. More information about Common Cause Maryland and this report, including the press release, is available at md.commoncause.org.