

EDITORIAL: Hey big spenders

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After ignoring the Wild West of civic election spending for many years, the province recently moved to bring in new campaign spending limits for local campaigns.

To which we say, what took them so long?

Some might like to think of municipal elections as relatively innocent affairs – good-natured contests between neighbours over who will best decide which potholes to fill. But the truth is municipalities aren't that simple any more. They are increasingly big governments making very significant decisions about issues that frequently come with hefty price tags.

So too have the price tags of municipal campaigns ballooned in an Aussie-rules free-for-all. As an indication of that, both mayoral candidates in the City of North Vancouver would have significantly outspent new spending limits if they had been in place in 2014. So would five North Shore council contenders.

The escalating role of money in local elections isn't healthy for democracy. The more money that's necessary to even enter a race, the fewer people will try. And all too often, political donations come from companies or unions with a direct interest in decisions being made at municipal hall.

Whether it's real or imagined, when that happens there's an uncomfortable suspicion on the part of the public that he who pays the piper calls the tune.

A ban on corporate and union donations is sadly lacking in the new rules. Finally, one of the most important issues in any regulatory structure is enforcement. If nobody enforces the rules or checks for loopholes, they remain essentially meaningless.

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