

Vancouver looks at campaign spending query

Councillors may ask province for ballot question on municipal politics

Rules need to be clear in a democracy and campaign finance and election rules should be the clearest.

Vancouver city councillors will soon consider a motion that calls for the issue of municipal campaign spending rules to be put to a referendum.



NICK PROCAYLO Coun. Andrea Reimer wants B.C. to include on the 2017 provincial election ballot a question asking whether municipalities should create their own campaign spending rules and caps.

The motion from Coun. Andrea Reimer, introduced Tuesday, asks B.C. to include on the 2017 provincial election ballot a question asking whether municipalities should create their own campaign spending rules and caps. But the province said no changes are planned for the current campaign finance rules and there are no plans to allow a referendum.

Reimer's motion notes that the city has formally asked the province seven times since 2005 for changes to the Vancouver Charter so it can create its own campaign finance rules, "including the power to ban donations from corporations and unions, limit contributions from individuals and impose election spending limits."

When asked why political parties could not simply self-regulate, Reimer said the terms voluntary and democracy don't work well together.

"Rules need to be clear in a democracy and campaign finance and election rules should be the clearest. They need to be reported, they need to be enforceable and they need to be in the control of the people who vote in elections, and that's what we're asking the province to do," Reimer said in an interview.

The motion notes campaign spending in Vancouver's 2014 civic election reached nearly \$6 million, and states that Bill 17, the provincial government's recently passed Local Elections Campaign Financing Amendment Act,

“fails to prevent unlimited contributions.” Reimer said she was disappointed in the act, and having exhausted other avenues in the push for stronger limits, felt it was time the question of municipal campaign spending be put to the public.

Peter Fassbender, the minister of community, sport and cultural development, defended Bill 17, calling it a “great success story for democracy in British Columbia.”

He said the province’s amended legislation — which is awaiting royal assent — established a framework for expense limits and added that B.C. intended to implement those limits in time for the 2018 local elections.

“We do not anticipate any further changes to campaign finance rules or a referendum at this time,” Fassbender said.

Mayor Gregor Robertson spoke in favour of spending rules similar to those that exist federally.

“Vancouver city council has been calling for taking the big money out of politics here in our city for years and years,” Robertson said, “This has been a huge priority for us, to ban corporate and union donations, to dramatically reduce the individual donations that are allowed.”

Robertson said there’s still time to make a change before the 2018 municipal election, adding that “it will make a big difference for transparency and accountability and giving the public comfort that there’s no big money involved in the campaign.”

Slipped into Reimer’s motion was mention of an almost \$1-million donation received by the Non-Partisan Association in the lead-up to the 2011 election.

George Affleck, a councillor with the Non-Partisan Association, balked at the mention, noting that Vision Vancouver raised even more cash before the last election than his party had. The NPA has been supportive of campaign finance reform and of transparency between elections as well, he said.

“If the mayor is truly saying that he wants to see transparency, then open your books up at Vision Vancouver and show us how much money you’re raking in right now in between elections. That’s where you really have to look at where the power is and who controls the politicians ... if that’s the worry,” Affleck said. “Vision Vancouver, open up your books. Show us where your money’s coming from. If you want finance reform, that’s where you start.”

The councillor said he needed to have a closer look at Reimer’s motion, which was introduced briefly Tuesday, before he could say whether he’d support it or not.

Francesco Trebbi, a professor at the University of B.C.’s Vancouver School of Economics, said campaign spending caps can both help and hurt political incumbents. While parties in power tend to have the largest war chests (and thus the most donations to lose if a cap is set below the amount they would otherwise be able to raise), they also tend to be better known to an electorate than a political hopeful, so require less money to build name recognition.

B.C.’s Referendum Act sets out that if the provincial government decides public opinion is desirable on a matter of interest or concern, it can order a referendum. If the province declined to put the issue of campaign finance reform to referendum, the city could still consider an initiative petition under the Recall and Initiative Act or a municipal referendum on the issue, Reimer said.

11 Comment(s)

[Wet Coaster](#)

20 April 2016

07:16

Spending limits are needed. Well heeled developers have been the source of much of campaign financing. It would appear their funding has created a pro development mindset which isn't necessarily good. In South Surrey it has created traffic chaos worthy of the downtown cores of big cities. I know because I've lived in the centre of Toronto and Calgary.



[Ricketty Rabbit](#)

20 April 2016

07:30

Reimer is on the right track. She's principled and hard-working even though she's on moonbeam's team. Before sitting on council she was a hard-working volunteer for community organizations, giving her time free to help create a better community. She was appreciated for all her good work by those community organizations.

[tug](#)

20 April 2016

08:13

All elections will be bought until all parties are spending the same amount on their campaigns. An old acquaintance still lives denial about how he won a mayors election by "getting out the youth vote" but I know it was because his team spent three times more on the campaign than the closest rival and he made sure they spelled his name right.



[Stryder](#)

20 April 2016

08:49

Fassbender wants the status quo because it benefits his party. NPA calling for Vision to open it's books is a red herring. We're talking about the future here, not the past.

The provincial gov't should have no part in municipal politics.

RR, I'm surprised that you would stoop so low as to call Robertson, Moonbeam.



[Art Iskandid](#)

20 April 2016

10:08

A poor, and lonely candidate, with little funding, may nevertheless have good ideas. But probably not.

We need governments that have a broad range of ideas, and open-mindedness, but with the ability to select and to implement good policies.

A level playing field, we hope, would lead to less "party" politics.



[Ricketty Rabbit](#)

20 April 2016

12:24

"RR, I'm surprised that you would stoop so low as to call Robertson, Moonbeam."

Point taken. Henceforth he shall be known by me as "bike lane". :-)



[RHW](#)

20 April 2016

12:45

Rich cities will be different than poor ones. Provincial laws are necessary to be fair to all.



[GMan](#)

20 April 2016

12:46

There will never be a level playing field until the third party advertising is taken into account.

When Vision or the NDP receives free advertising or "volunteer" help from their union friends, does it really matter what the official spending limits are?

In past elections I saw numerous adds by the teachers and nurses unions speaking against the government. These were third party ads so they were not included in the NDPs spending budget. They never mentioned the political parties but it was obvious who they were targeting.



[Nanny Ogg](#)

20 April 2016

13:14

I understand why parties need a certain amount of advertising at election time, few people will bother to actually examine the policies. There should be rigorous caps and no third party spending allowed. Level playing field. Donation restrictions too.



[Stryder](#)

20 April 2016

13:15

Gman, don't know if it will make any difference to you, but the BCTF and locals, usually have a questionnaire, dealing with ed issues. They send this out to each candidate/party and then make recommendations to their members based on the returns.



[Stryder](#)

20 April 2016

13:17

Nanny, I understand your point, however I would argue that little of substance comes from advertising, in terms of info about policies.