
Posted on Fri, Mar. 24, 2006

Mayor: Public should finance S.J. campaigns

By John Woolfolk
Mercury News

San Jose Mayor Ron Gonzales proposed full public funding Thursday for future mayoral and city council races, hoping to bury what he said is a perception that campaign contributions influence decisions at City Hall.

A number of cities, including San Francisco and Los Angeles, already make public money available to pay part of a qualifying candidate's campaign costs. But San Jose could become the first California city to offer tax money to cover the full cost of candidates' campaigns if the city council approves Gonzales' proposal.

``The time is right for campaign-finance reform that ensures that San Jose voters are in the driver's seat," Gonzales said, speaking to reporters in the City Hall Rotunda.

Gonzales, who is in the last year of his second and final four-year term as mayor, would not be affected by his proposal, which would go into effect in 2008 at the earliest.

Portland, Ore., and Albuquerque, N.M., recently began providing full public financing for their elections. Six states are providing full public funding for certain races, and California lawmakers are considering it for legislative elections.

Some candidates running this year to replace Gonzales largely supported the proposal. But in Portland, business leaders tried unsuccessfully to undo the public financing with an initiative.

Carl Guardino, president and CEO of the Silicon Valley Leadership Group, which represents 202 valley employers, said he could not speak for the group. But he said he was personally concerned about adding costs to a city already facing a \$35.9 million budget deficit.

``Full and immediate disclosure of contributions still allows people to participate in the process, yet shed sunshine on who gives and how much and potentially why they give," Guardino said.

Bob Stern, president of the Center for Governmental Studies in Los Angeles, which studies state and local campaign financing throughout the country, said a growing number of cities are saying disclosure alone is not enough.

``This may be the decade of public financing," Stern said. ``More and more jurisdictions are considering it and more and more jurisdictions are adopting it."

Public financing would provide candidates the amount of funding that they are currently limited to spending. In San Jose, candidates for mayor may raise up to \$708,000 per election in \$500 increments. Council candidates can raise \$90,000 to \$98,000 per election in increments of \$250.

Publicly financing mayoral and council campaigns would cost San Jose about \$2 million to \$3 million a year, which would most likely be paid out of a reserve set aside in the city's general fund. Costs would vary depending on the number of campaigns and candidates.

Not every candidate would qualify for public funding; candidates would first have to raise token contributions from the public. In Portland, for instance, mayoral candidates must raise \$5 contributions from 1,500 residents before they qualify. Candidates opposed to spending tax money on their campaigns do not have to accept public financing.

The mayor said Thursday's announcement wasn't inspired by his recent political troubles but rather the fact that elected officials must constantly defend campaign contributions from critics who suggest undue influence.

`` There remains a strong perception that contributions impact how an elected official votes. Although I strongly believe this is not the case, media hype and political opportunists play 'gotcha' with every campaign fundraising filing statement," Gonzales said.

The mayor asked that the city council on April 4 direct the San Jose Elections Commission to study a `` voter-owned campaign ordinance" that could be in effect by the June 2008 primary. He asked that the commission, a five-member, council-appointed advisory panel that evaluates complaints of campaign rule violations, return to the council in August with recommendations.

Gonzales was joined in Thursday's announcement by Councilwoman Nancy Pyle as well as backers of the state bill, AB 583 by Assemblywoman Loni Hancock, D-El Cerrito, that would provide public financing for legislative races.

Michael Mulcahy, former director of the Children's Musical Theater and a candidate to succeed Gonzales as mayor, said he hopes the council adopts the proposal.

`` I think it's long overdue," said Mulcahy, who has vowed not to accept campaign contributions from lobbyists. `` I don't think we're going to clean up our government until we clean up the way our campaigns are financed."

Councilman Dave Cortese, also a candidate for mayor and frequent critic of Gonzales, praised the mayor for urging public campaign financing.

`` The mayor introducing this is good leadership on his part," Cortese said. `` I have no problem with that. It's well worth studying."

City Hall has been rocked by a series of scandals and controversies during Gonzales' tenure, and leading candidates in this year's mayoral race have made ethical and transparent government a key campaign theme.

The council approved new disclosure rules for lobbyists after former Councilman Terry Gregory pleaded guilty to failing to report gifts from developers and resigned last year. In December, the council censured Gonzales over what a civil grand jury called a `` backroom deal" promising the city would cover higher labor costs for a trash hauler that also had contributed to his campaign.

Contact John Woolfolk at jwoolfolk@mercurynews.com or (408) 975-9346.