



## City Hall neglects campaign finance reform

**By Heather Douglas, President & CEO, The Calgary Chamber of Commerce  
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"Finance Ministers are normally the only rational members of any cabinet," quipped Paul Martin Jr., former finance minister and prime minister, as he addressed the Association of Canadian Investment Dealers in London (11 April 1994).

Too bad City Hall does not have a sitting Finance Minister. They communicate financial stability and democratic bliss as they steady capital markets and the public believes elections are fair. Sitting Finance Ministers convey that governments serve everyone's interests.

Calgary badly needs campaign finance reform. In the past, some corporations and wealthy citizens have used their sizable donations to systematically influence political decisions. A few traded on their fundraising abilities or morphed into greedy, self-interested backroom operatives. Others merely lobbied for favours.

Unfortunately, despite the multitude of municipal by-laws, no one has seen fit to close the loopholes on donations and election spending. Yet the door to City Hall swings on the hinges of openness, transparency, and equal access for all - regardless of wealth, influence, or status.

Last fall, during the civic election, the Calgary Chamber of Commerce waxed eloquent as we called for campaign finance reform. Almost 90% of our several thousand members believe that transparency and accountability of City Hall's decisions were the same or had worsened since 2004 (the last civic election). They are frustrated by large contributions to the various war chests, candidates' land holdings, whose family had a numbered company bidding on a transportation upgrading project, and what happened to the surpluses of the defeated candidates.

The Chamber likes the Federal Accountability Act. It imposes a complete ban on donations by corporations, unions, and organizations. It also lowers the contribution levels from \$5,000 to \$1,000 that an individual can make to a registered political party.

In 2002, Toronto established an Election Finance Review Task Force to examine all aspects of municipal election financing - from contribution limits to reporting practices, and from filing procedures to ongoing monitoring and enforcement. We think Calgary needs the same sort of multi-disciplinary approach. Call in accountants, lawyers, academics, concerned taxpayers' groups, even the Calgary Chamber of Commerce. Altogether we could produce something brilliant and workable.

In the meantime, to bring openness, transparency, and equal access to City Hall, the Chamber recommends:

- Align municipal campaign financing rules with the federal and provincial governments by imposing a ban on contributions by corporations, unions, and all special interest groups;
- Limit contributions to \$1,000/donor/candidate;
- Establish an electronic filing system that enables candidates to electronically track and file campaign donations and thus make it easier for the public who has contributed to which campaign and for how much money;



- Establish a candidate conflict of interest registry with published lists of family members, interests in corporations or organizations, land holdings, and contracts with City Hall;
- Require that all surplus campaign funds be donated to the city or a registered non-profit charity after each election; and
- Make donations from individuals to municipal political campaigns tax deductible.

The Chamber is aware that when City Hall translates these recommendations into by-laws there will be consequences -- candidates will start campaigning much earlier and campaign costs will continue to rise, despite controlling the amount any donor can give.

While we know that life does become "less amusing when one becomes Minister of Finance," to quote the eloquent John Crosbie (24 Oct. 1979), the Chamber believes that Calgary needs a Finance Minister. Calgarians would be delighted everytime our Minister announces a better first quarter than Toronto.