

FAIR ELECTION FUND COMMISSION

PRINCE GEORGE'S COUNTY, MARYLAND

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January 25, 2024

Dear County Executive Alsobrooks, County Council Chair Ivey, and Members of the County Council:

With this letter, the Fair Election Fund Commission sends you our formal budget recommendation for monies to be included in the FY 2025 budget for the Fair Election Fund. This recommendation is one of the primary responsibilities of the Commission.

We arrive at our recommendation following a review of the law and two fiscal assessments of the program conducted by County staff, and discussions with State and County officials. We recommend the allocation of \$2 million to the Fund in FY 2025. When added to \$400,000 appropriated in FY 2024 and an additional amount of \$1.25 million that we recommend for FY 2026, the Fund will reach the total we believe necessary for a successful 2026 election cycle: \$3.65 million.

Our Commission is charged to oversee the rollout and successful operation of the Prince George's County Fair Election Program beginning with the 2026 election cycle. The Fund will provide matching public monies to candidates running for Council or Executive seats who opt-in and qualify for the County's Fair Election (small donor) Program. Candidates qualify by raising a minimum number of small contributions of certain prescribed amounts from County residents. Matching funds are allocated using a formula specified in the law (CB-099-2018 as amended by CB-076-2023).

Adequate funding is essential to the success of this program. A well-funded and well-run program will affirm Prince George's County's commitment to grass-roots democracy and support for community-based candidates whose campaigns are solely financed with small dollar contributions from Prince George's County residents and the specified match of tax dollars from the County. In 2026, Prince George's County will join Montgomery and Howard Counties who have run small donor public financing election programs in

Fair Election Fund Commission

c/o Office of Finance, Prince George's County Government
1301 McCormick Drive, Suite 1100, Largo, MD 20774

<https://www.princegeorgescountymd.gov/boards-commissions/fair-election-fund-commission>

previous election cycles.

Two fiscal analyses have been produced by County agencies: in October 2018 by the Office of Audits and Investigations and in November 2023 by the Council's Budget and Policy Analysis division. The minimum Fund amount identified for review in both analyses is \$3.65 million for the 2026 election cycle. This figure was arrived at by assuming that two candidates would opt in and qualify for a full public match for the executive race and each of the eleven council races. Other scenarios in the 2018 analysis were based on the numbers of candidates who filed to run in prior elections, and these resulted in larger required funding totals that ranged from the lowest \$3.65 million figure to \$12.125 million, with the largest figure assuming that all candidates who filed opted for public financing.

The November 2023 report examined data from the 2018 and 2022 publicly funded elections in Montgomery County finding that roughly a third of candidates who filed in Montgomery County chose to run publicly financed campaigns. Of those who did, roughly a third raised sufficient funds to reach the maximum match or close to it.

In the event that the allocated funds are not adequate to meet the demand at amounts specified in the legislation, the public financing law requires that the matching amounts be reduced for all candidates. Should this occur, community-supported candidates who have qualified for the program may find themselves severely restricted in their ability to compete with traditionally funded campaigns. Such an outcome would reflect poorly on the County and be a bad precedent.

On the contrary, overinvesting in the Fund would not be a waste of public monies. Any funds remaining in the accounts of publicly financed candidates would revert back to the Fund after the election, and any unspent appropriation would remain in the Fund to be used in a future election cycle.

Finally, we know and appreciate the challenge you have to balance the budget for FY 2025, and we urge you to see our request as an important investment to expand citizen involvement in County government. For perspective, the total amount recommended here for the 2026 election cycle is 0.086% of the County's FY 2024 General Fund or, spread over a 4-year cycle, 0.022% of the General Fund. This would be the equivalent of a family with a \$50,000 annual salary allocating \$10 per year.

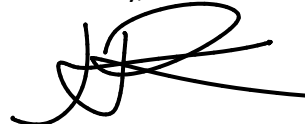
Prior to the passage of the Fair Election Fund legislation in 2018, Council discussions cited the need to adequately fund the program as the reason to amend the bill on the final day of passage and postpone the start of the program from the 2022 to the 2026 elections. However no monies were added to the Fund in the subsequent four budget cycles; the first and only tranche of \$400,000 was added to the Fund in FY 2024. This leaves us with the need to allocate

\$3.25 million total in FY 2025 and FY 2026 for minimal program funding for the program with the understanding that more can be allocated as needed.

To ensure the success of this new and innovative program to engage and empower voters and incentivize small donor-funded campaigns, we urge the County Executive and County Council to demonstrate a strong commitment to the grassroots funding of elections by including \$2 million in the FY 2025 budget for the Fair Election Fund with the intention to allocate an additional \$1.25 million in FY 2026. This would give candidates and voters confidence that the program is viable. Let's not risk falling short of the County's commitment to fair and equitable elections at a time when confidence in government has eroded across the country and democratic principles themselves are under assault as never before.

The Commission welcomes questions and dialogue on this and other Fair Election Fund matters. Thank you for your consideration and support.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'JM Parker', written over a horizontal line.

Mrs. J.M. Parker, Chair
Fair Elections Fund Commission

cc: Stanley A. Earley, Director
Office of Management and Budget

Jennifer A. Jenkins, Administrator
Prince George's County Council