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Dems circulate bill to publicly fund state officials' campaigns

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Wednesday, February 1, 2012 8:46 p.m.

Updated Thursday, February 2, 2012 1:22:47 a.m.

As potential recall elections loom overhead, Wisconsin legislators are circulating a bill that would restructure current campaign finance laws and reestablish public financing.

According to a statement, Sen. [Fred Risser](#), D-Madison; Sen. Dave Hansen, D-Green Bay; and Rep. Mark Pocan, D-Madison, are currently circulating a bill for co-sponsors that would provide the option of 100 percent publicly financed campaigns to all statewide candidates.

“Our desire to clean up government in Wisconsin alone is not enough,” Pocan said in the statement. “We need real reform, and that’s why I’m proud to once again lead the fight for the most sweeping campaign finance change Wisconsin has ever seen. Campaigns should be an exchange of ideas and priorities, not an opportunity for special interest groups and corporations to buy unlimited attack ads.”

According to a statement, the bill would create the Wisconsin Clean Election Fund, which would provide public financing for state political campaigns for the state Assembly and Senate.

The fund would also create public financing for other state elections, including the governor and Wisconsin Supreme Court races, the bill’s sponsors said in the statement. The election fund is modeled after similar finance systems in Arizona and Maine.

If passed, the bill would reintroduce public campaign funding to Wisconsin. Legislators eliminated the public funds in the last budget.

Government Accountability Board spokesperson Reid Magney said public financing was repealed because GAB’s funding was already low.

Magney also said GAB used funds previously intended for public finance to implement the new voter ID law, which takes effect for the 2012 elections.

In a joint email sent to legislators, Pocan, Risser and Hansen laid out the qualifications for public funds.

They said in the email candidates must collect a certain number of \$5 contributions from their districts, which varied by the office for which they were running. Candidates who meet this requirement can then receive a grant, the size of which is determined by their intended office position, the email said.

Candidates for Assembly could receive as much as \$75,000 total, while senatorial candidates could receive as much as \$150,000 total. Gubernatorial candidates could receive \$3,000,000.

If needed, candidates would be given additional grant money for the primary election, the email said. Candidates would also have the option of accepting matching contributions in an effort to offset funding gaps between candidates that choose public funding and those who opt out.

Uncontested candidates could receive a grant equal to the average expenditures of the candidates during the four previous election years, the email said.

Jay Heck, executive director of Common Cause in Wisconsin, said the bill may give candidates more time to be responsive to the public.

“The virtue of the bill is that candidates don’t have to spend time raising money from special interest groups,” Heck said. “This frees up legislators and state officials from raising money for the next campaign. They aren’t beholden to the campaign, but the public.”

However, with a Republican-dominated Legislature and Republican governor, the bill is not likely to be passed, Heck said. A similar reform, the Impartial Justice Law, which provided full public financing for Supreme Court candidates, was repealed in June 2011.

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