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## ELECTION 2016

# North Port moves to cap donations

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In the middle of a hotly contested election year, North Port city commissioners are moving to set a limit on campaign donations far lower than what the state allows.

If the proposed ordinance receives final approval, donors will be limited to \$250 per candidate for each election cycle. Since 2013 the Florida Legislature has allowed contributions as high as \$1,000 for city offices.

The proposed change comes as an incumbent, a former commissioner and four newcomers have already announced their candidacy for three open commission seats.

"In recent elections we saw incumbents pulling in enormous amounts of money," said Commissioner Cheryl Cook, who brought the idea before the commission. "I believe this is actually something that will level the playing field."

City Attorney Mark Moriarty said donations made prior to the change will be exempted.

As of Feb. 29 the only current commission candidate to raise more than \$250 in a donation was District 3 candidate Deborah McDowell, who is running unopposed. (On Jan. 4, McDowell received a \$300 check from an Illinois resident.)

McDowell questioned the timing of the ordinance and the fact that it was proposed by Cook, who is up for re-election.

"Why didn't they visit this a year ago? There were no candidates at that time," McDowell said. "For them to do it in the middle of election cycle is wrong ... They're limiting my ability to run an effective campaign."

McDowell said Cook should have abstained from voting because she is a candidate this year. Moriarty, the city attorney, said nothing in the statutes prevented Cook from voting.

Cook defended the move, saying donations from interest groups must be curbed.

"This is a national dialogue, everyone is talking special interest money and how that influences campaigns," she said.

In 2013, the Legislature doubled contribution limits for city offices and other local elections from \$500 to \$1,000.

That change had no effect on Sarasota County and the city of Sarasota, which have capped campaign contributions at \$200 per person, per cycle. The city of Venice follows the limit set by the state.

Last week, North Port commissioners voted 3-to-2 to lower the donation limit to \$250.

Mayor Jacqueline Moore and Commissioner Linda Yates dissented, saying it was too close to City Commission elections to make the change.

“After this election would be the most ideal time, and we can address it and put it into play for the next election cycle,” Yates said.

In the 2014 City Commission elections, Yates and Moore received multiple \$1,000 campaign donations. In total, the newcomer Moore raised \$33,350 and Yates, an incumbent, raised \$15,380.

Neither Yates nor Moore are up for re-election this year.

Vice Mayor Rhonda DiFranco said there was no optimal time to make the change.

“Right after this election, guess what, they’ll start running for the 2018. Somebody will announce for 2018,” she said.

The city attorney said the earliest date an ordinance could be passed is April 26.

Even then, commissioners could set an effective date later.

During public comment, commission candidate Nicholas Trolli Sr. argued against the limits.

“If a person is running for election it’s hard enough to raise money, if you’re not an incumbent,” he said. “Our state officials in Tallahassee have decided it’s \$1,000, why should we change that?”

Vanessa Carusone, a former city commissioner running in District 1 for a third term, said the proposed ordinance is an attempt to stifle candidates and the public.

She said reducing the campaign contributions per person would also fail to stop large amounts of money from one source reaching a candidate.

“You’re not going to limit the total contributions; you’re just going to get more checks,” she said. “Instead of one check you’ll just get a check from a mother, a father, a son.”

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