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Redlands2030 submission on the feasibility of introducing expenditure caps for Queensland local government elections

Redland City local council campaign spending

Redland City has approximately 100,000 voters who can participate in election of the Mayor.

The City's voters are divided into 10 divisions who each elect one divisional councillor.

As a very rough rule of thumb, we understand that candidates for office may spend up to \$2.50 per voter on their campaigns but many candidates spend much less – with the normal range for divisional councillors being between \$1 and \$2 per voter.

For mayoral elections we know that current Mayor Karen Williams declared \$138,372.80 in donations for the 2012 election when she was challenging an incumbent mayor. She was supported by a supposedly third party entity, the Concerned Redlands Residents Association (CRRA), which declared donations to it of \$21,625. This resulted in total available funds for the pro-Williams campaign in 2012 being \$160,047.80.

In 2016, incumbent Mayor Karen Williams declared gifts worth \$81,605.65.

But we don't know how much she actually spent on either of the 2012 or 2016 campaigns.

We understand that in 2016 the unsuccessful challenger to Karen Williams (Mr Greg Underwood) spent about \$40,000 of his own money (no donations) on his mayoral campaign.

Major areas of expenditure on election campaigning in Redland City Council elections include flyers, corflutes, newspaper advertisements, social media advertising, how to vote cards and tee shirts for campaign team members. There could be office accommodation and general administrative costs.

Occasionally large advertising signs and billboards may be used in mayoral election campaigns.

Redland City does not have a television station of its own. Advertising on Brisbane metropolitan television stations is not cost effective for candidates in Redland City Council elections.

The story is similar for radio except that Redlands has a community radio station which accepts 'sponsorship'.

Advantages of incumbency

Incumbent councillors (especially mayors) have significant advantages including most obviously that they are being paid full time to be a politician. In Redland City, their remuneration package includes some form of vehicle entitlement and many councillors put a personal advertising 'wrap' on their car.

As well as benefiting from propaganda issued by the local council as 'newsletters', magazines and media releases, incumbents can promote themselves through mechanisms such as allocation of community grants and attendance at community functions.

Incumbents may also be able to reuse some of their advertising material from previous elections, such as corflutes.

Political parties and independents

In the Redlands candidates for local council are not endorsed by political parties. But there is considerable activity by politicians from both major political parties at state and Federal level in attempting to get like-minded people elected to the Council.

Direct election of mayors may be the problem

Under current arrangements where mayors are directly elected there is the potential for vested interests to fund the election of a mayor who is considered likely to deliver the decisions which suit those vested interests. If the big end of town decides to pick a winner, then the chances of other candidates become very slim.

Recent legislative changes to the powers of mayors to direct officers may have reduced the perceived advantage to vested interests of getting 'their' person elected as mayor – but very slightly.

Also, legislation banning donations by property developers has made it more difficult for this type of vested interest to influence politics in Queensland. But there are other problem donors including companies that benefit from major contracts awarded by local councils.

An option for reducing the potential for mayoral corruption could be to revert to having mayors elected from and by the directly elected councillors. This would be more in line with Australia's political tradition which is based on the Westminster system of government.

Such a change should give the elected divisional councillors more power to oversee the conduct of whoever they elected as mayor because they could un-elect a mayor if they perform unsatisfactorily.

Expenditure caps for local council elections

For so long as we have directly elected mayors in Queensland, any consideration of expenditure caps should be focused on ensuring that money can't buy mayoral election victories.

Expenditure cap principles can then be scaled down to cover divisional councillor candidates.

Expenditure caps should be set to ensure that election campaigns are functional but not extravagant.

The expenditure caps which currently apply in NSW and New Zealand, as cited in the Committee's discussion paper, appear to be sensible and should provide a good starting point for setting caps in Queensland.

There will be little point in introducing expenditure caps unless they are accompanied by effective disclosure and enforcement measures.

The arrangements for expenditure caps would need to be designed to ensure that they can't be avoided through use of supposedly third party entities which are actually ancillary campaigns for a particular candidate.

However, any regulation of third party spending should be designed to not be administratively burdensome for community groups advocating on particular issues during election campaigns.

We note that the Committee is currently considering legislation which includes funding caps for state parliament elections. If implemented, the effectiveness of these laws should be reviewed before expenditure caps for local government elections in 2024 are finalised.

Yours sincerely



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Redlands2030 Inc.

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