

**From:** [REDACTED]  
**To:** [EGC](#)  
**Subject:** Your Community First submission in relation to Local Government Electoral (Implementing Stage 1 of Belcarra) and Other Legislation Amendment Bill 2018  
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Chairperson  
Economics and Governance Committee  
Queensland Parliament

Your Community First Inc. (YCF) contested the 2016 local government elections in Moreton Bay.

It fielded candidates in 5 of the 12 council divisions and came outright second in all 5 with results that varied from 42% to 23% of the vote, averaging 34% on a Two Candidate Preferred basis.

YCF knew it was in for a David versus Goliath fight against [REDACTED] well funded 'team' of incumbent councillors and retiring councillors' personal picks, all running as independents. But in the face of its overtures on behalf of the community for fairer rates, charges and spending practices being persistently ignored by council, it decided to give it a go.

It registered its team with the ECQ as an official 'group of candidates', and was chuffed when YCF was obliquely complimented by the Electoral Commissioner during the Op Belcarra hearings as having complied with the rules in running a group of candidates.

We were fully aware from disclosure returns on the ECQ website and press reports that [REDACTED] campaigns had been largely funded by property developers in the previous two elections in 2008 and 2012 and expected nothing different in the 2016 election.

With campaign funding for the 2012 elections of \$255,200, [REDACTED] blew his opposition out of the park with a combination of billboards, prime time TV and radio advertising, press ads, corflute and trailer mounted electronic sign sites – some shared with his fellow councillors, and a large quantity of professionally printed and delivered letterbox material. A third party, the [REDACTED] was the biggest single donor giving \$110,500.

The next highest donor with three donations totaling \$75,000 was a company linked to prominent property developers in the Moreton Bay region. Other major contributors, the same as what occurred in 2016, were property developers or businesses linked to property development.

We expected to run against a similarly funded campaign but hoped that community sentiment and dissatisfaction were on our side, particularly after all the well-publicized

series of controversies the mayor had attracted during his preceding two terms. But contrary to our hopes, a combination of a benign press not advocating change, the significant advantages of incumbency or endorsement by a former well-known incumbent, and the big spend of the [REDACTED] team proved too much to beat.

It is the latter factor that is the subject of this submission.

What chance has a well meaning but poorly funded citizen's group got when it's up against a massively funded incumbent council. A council in Moreton Bay's case which doesn't run on a policy platform per se, but simply runs on the name of its councillors and a shared common slogan which in 2016 was "For a brighter future", which interestingly was also used by the council for promoting the university that it had committed to building at Petrie.

That that team is able to significantly boost its presence over its opponents is enabled by a combination of a conservative local press which merely reports and doesn't actively criticize council, and the sheer power of modern day advertising funded by a large campaign war chest which in 2016 was \$188,000, over half of which came from [REDACTED]. Again [REDACTED] used most of the hitherto mentioned campaign advertising techniques but this time shared billboards with a number of fellow councillors.

YCF tried to raise funds for its team's campaign by making overtures to some small businesses in Moreton Bay (most certainly not property developers), but because of its relatively low profile failed to attract any significant donations. Its donations total of \$5,242 came mainly from private citizen supporters. Its candidates were therefore obliged in large part to fund their own campaigns with personal out-of-pocket expenditures ranging from \$4,000 to \$20,000.

So how can democracy be properly served when such a significant funding imbalance exists between candidates? An imbalance which is further supported by the advantages of incumbency, a particularly powerful factor at local government level, and a benign non-critical press.

In our opinion the only significant way to reduce the fiscal imbalance is to cap campaign expenditure. But In the absence of expenditure caps, as is the case in this instance, YCF supports the bill before the Parliament banning developer donations as a way of to some extent levelling up the playing field. Real time donation declarations as already implemented by the government will also greatly help with transparency in the lead up to elections.

But so long as donations are allowed to be made to candidates, unscrupulous parties will find ways to funnel developer funding to candidates, even with the bill's intention of making illegal the use of third parties such as trusts, companies or individuals to channel such funding to candidates.

Other features of the bill such as councillors having to declare a conflict of interest, and their colleagues being obliged to disclose fellow councillor's conflicts of interest should go a significant way to reducing the impact of donor influence on council decisions in the property development field.

One area of concern to us however, not addressed by the bill but of relevance in relation to mayors and councillors circumventing conflicts of interest regulation is the practice of councils to conduct pre-meetings prior to the conduct of formal general meetings which are open to the public. These pre-meetings are treated as "unofficial meetings" where no minutes are taken and the potential for orchestration of outcomes in relation to decision making is obvious.

Another concern in relation to the potential for council decisions to be influenced by donors is the ability of mayors to issue directions to CEOs without it being recorded and thus subject to scrutiny.

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