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Campaign Financing at the Local Level: A Primer on HB 120

The Problem

- Over the last several decades, the cost of campaigning for elective office has escalated rapidly.
- Since the beginning of the decade, even municipalities have witnessed jaw-droppingly expensive campaigns:
 - Raleigh and Charlotte mayoral races have topped \$500,000.
 - Greensboro, Asheville, and Wilmington mayoral races have neared \$100,000.
 - At-large city council seats (and even some district seats) run to more than \$25,000 in many of North Carolina's metro areas.
- The consequences of expensive campaigns:
 - Nearly 60% of at-large races at the local level are non-competitive—only 1 viable candidate is on the ballot. Many qualified citizens are popular in their neighborhoods, but are unable to afford the cost of running a campaign.
 - Special interest groups that finance campaigns have disproportionate access to elected officials, who are elected to represent all citizens of a municipality.
 - Since local campaigns typically suffer from low turnout, campaign money is generally spent on mailers or other advertising to boost name recognition, rather than candidates engaging voters in public forums and debates.

The Solution

- The time has come for publicly-financed campaigns at the local level.
- Public financing options require candidates to demonstrate grassroots support among their constituents, cease outside fundraising, and accept strict spending limits, in exchange for receiving public funds.
- Public financing is proven to increase competition, diversity, and voter engagement in the campaign process. Such a system already exists in North Carolina
 - For all appellate judicial elections
 - For 3 Council of State elections (Auditor, Insurance Commissioner, Superintendent of Public Instruction)
 - For the Town of Chapel Hill's municipal elections. (Public funds are also used for municipal elections in Portland, Oregon, and Albuquerque, New Mexico.)
- In 2009, the General Assembly has the opportunity to authorize public municipal campaigns for any city in North Carolina, by passing HB 120.
- The bill shifts authority over municipal elections to municipalities themselves: a city would have to find funding, devise an ordinance, and be approved by the State Board of Elections. No city would be forced to participate in the program, just as no candidate is forced to use public money for campaigns.
- The bill is **cost-neutral** to the state.