

# Ethics make a comeback

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Between the plea deal and resignation of Baltimore Mayor Sheila Dixon and the U.S. Supreme Court's ruling opening the floodgates of corporate money in elections, January hasn't been a great month for open, transparent and ethical government. But there are at least some signs that local and state officials are pushing back. Two state senators announced this week that they would seek new rules restricting corporate influence over elections in ways not prohibited by the court decision; Baltimore's ethics board has restricted the kind of charity fundraising that led to Mayor Dixon's downfall; and the presiding officers in the General Assembly have agreed to begin posting committee votes online. There is much more that can be done, but these efforts signal a growing consensus that government must be more accountable.

State Sens. Brian E. Frosh and Jamie Raskin are seeking legislation to ban state contractors from the unlimited corporate spending on elections that the Supreme Court ruled last week was protected under the First Amendment (and which, it turns out, has been legal in state and local elections in Maryland all along). They want to require shareholder approval of such expenditures and to explicitly prohibit businesses from writing such expenses off on their taxes.

They should also push for disclosure requirements. As it stands, corporations can run ads supporting or opposing candidates with no accountability. If, hypothetically, a major energy company were upset at the policy stances of Gov. Martin O'Malley, it could run ads attacking him on those or any other grounds it chose without the public ever knowing who was behind the effort. Senator Frosh suggested one way to fix that would be to require the president of the company to appear in the ads saying he approved the message. That would help, but not as much as requiring those who engage in such activities to report them to the Board of Elections, much in the same way candidates and political action committees do, so the public can gauge the size and scope of any special interest's efforts to sway an election.

In Baltimore, the ethics board on Tuesday approved a new requirement that city officials seek the board's permission at least 30 days before beginning any fundraising campaign and must say from whom, when and in what amounts they would seek gifts. This was a major issue in the corruption case against Mayor Dixon, who solicited gift cards from developers who stood to gain or lose millions from her decisions. The idea of soliciting donations from people the city does business with posed a terrible conflict of interest, and the lack of any sort of accounting standards made the program ripe for abuse.

Those changes come at the same time that mayor-to-be Stephanie C. Rawlings-Blake is proposing changes to the ethics board to reduce the mayor's influence over the body, and City Councilman William H. Cole IV is proposing reforms to eliminate the potential loopholes in the ethics law that Mayor Dixon's attorneys were seeking to exploit in her defense. Though Ms. Rawlings-Blake's bill could go even further to make the ethics

board independent, both it and Mr. Cole's legislation deserve support. And City Councilwoman Belinda K. Conaway's proposed charter amendment to shrink the city's Board of Estimates so it is no longer controlled by the mayor is the right idea, but it needs to be expanded into a broader reworking of that body to make it more meaningful and independent.

In Annapolis, both Senate President Thomas V. Mike Miller and House Speaker Michael E. Busch have said they will begin posting committee votes online, a major improvement over the current system in which the only reliable way to find out how a lawmaker voted on a key bill or amendment in committee -- where most real decisions take place -- was to drive to Annapolis and go through bill files. The system they're proposing isn't perfect; they're pledging to get the information online within 10 days, or by the time a bill comes up for a floor debate. Instead, they should seek to develop a system in which such votes could appear online in real time.

Speaker Busch says he is working on beginning live-streaming of committee hearings starting next year, which is also a major advance. What would make the live-streaming more effective would be better advance notice of when bills are coming up for committee votes. Initial hearings on bills are now generally scheduled well in advance and are relatively easy to find on the legislature's Web site. But there's no reliable way to know when the bills will come up for a vote, short of asking the committee chairman every day -- not something the average citizen can do.

There's more. Sen. Paul G. Pinsky is reintroducing his effort to create a voluntary system of public campaign financing in Maryland, which may be the only real hope for diminishing the importance of money in politics. The idea came close to passing last year and may have more momentum after the Supreme Court decision. There is also talk of seeking to depoliticize judicial elections, either through a proposal by Attorney General Douglas F. Gansler to eliminate contested judicial elections in favor of periodic retention elections or through an idea floated by Senator Miller to make judges part of a pilot program of public campaign finance.

It's unfortunate that it took a major scandal and an ill-advised Supreme Court decision, but it looks like there's more interest in reforming government than there has been in years. Voters need to let lawmakers know that they are eager for these reforms -- and more -- so that the issue doesn't die.