



THE ADVOCATE FOR NEW YORK CITY'S HISTORIC NEIGHBORHOODS

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Statement of the Historic Districts Council

City Council Committee on Governmental Operations

April 27, 2017

Regarding Introduction I130-2016: Amend Provisions of Campaign Finance Board's Small Donor Matching Program

The Historic Districts Council is the citywide advocate for New York's historic neighborhoods. HDC is dedicated to preserving the integrity of New York's Landmarks Law and to furthering the preservation ethic. It is in that service, the furtherance of the preservation ethic, that we are supporting this bill to reform New York City's campaign finance regulations and strengthen the voices of individual citizens.

As the Council members know too well, running for public office is not an inexpensive undertaking. Candidates are forced to compete in two separate arenas simultaneously; on one hand for votes without which they cannot be elected and on the other for contributions, without which they cannot run a campaign. This double competition can lead, at the very least, to a scattered attention, which doesn't well-serve the candidate or the constituency they hope to represent. At worst, it can lead to ethical conflict as a candidate is exposed to undue influences angling for personal gain in return for needed financial support. New York City's political history is unfortunately rife with examples of this. In 1963, journalist William Riordan wrote "Plunkitt of Tammany Hall", a series of dictated reminiscences by legendary ward boss George Washington Plunkitt on "honest" and "dishonest" graft – the difference being whether or not the community was being served while the politician enriched himself. While it might seem unfair to judge the actions of a previous century by today's mores, we should start with the premise that these kinds of practices should not be encouraged or continued. Furthermore, it is only factual to observe that the serious money in New York City resides in the real estate industry, an industry with a vested and specific interest in gaining access and influence in elected government, as well as a long and continuous history of attempting to enhance that influence through perfectly legal financial contributions.

The preservation community is not reflexively at odds with the real estate community; in fact we are ultimately dependent upon property owners to care for the historic buildings New Yorkers hold so dear. However, the Historic Districts Council feels strongly that the scales of governance must be adjusted to better account for the common good in relation to the individual gain. This proposed amendment will go a long way toward meeting that goal. If passed, it will empower individual citizens to better compete with vested interests by enhancing the financial impact of small donations. It will also be a source of strength for candidates, enabling them to serve the two goals of community engagement and fundraising with the same audience, the voters.