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Lost in the controversy — Moreland's critical recommendations

Civic leaders call on candidates to embrace campaign finance reform

by By JAMES GORMLEY, Gazette staff writer

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More than 20 prominent prosecutors, civic leaders and businesspeople sent a letter to every major candidate for the state Legislature, calling on them to embrace the Moreland Commission's recommendations for reforming campaign finance law, including a statewide system for public financing of campaigns.

The letter follows an op-ed in the New York Daily News, by Fritz Schwarz and Gerald Benjamin, which argued for a renewed focus on Moreland's findings and recommendations.

Specifically, the group is asking for matching funds for small donations, "reasonable" contribution limits, and tougher enforcement of campaign finance laws.

"The public interest requires public financing of elections. Public financing restores democracy by giving ordinary citizens — not big money interests — real ownership of their state government," said Gerald Benjamin, director of the Center for Research Regional Engagement and Outreach at SUNY New Paltz, and former New York City corporation counsel. "This single reform is the biggest step New York can take in freeing legislators to do the right thing every day, on every vote. Its passage in the new session is paramount."

In recent weeks the Moreland Commission to Investigate Public Corruption has been the focus of intense media scrutiny following a bombshell New York Times article and then conflicting reports about whether its work was improperly cut short or limited.

"The Moreland Commission is back in the news, with conflicting reports about whether its work was improperly cut short or limited," said Fritz Schwarz, chief counsel for the Brennan Center for Justice at NYU School of Law. "Lost in this controversy is the fact that the Commission's investigation uncovered a corrupt and broken campaign finance system,



Members of the Moreland Commission on public corruption hold a public hearing last fall. More than 20 prominent prosecutors, civic leaders and businesspeople sent a letter to every major candidate for the state Legislature, calling on them to embrace the Moreland Commission's recommendations for reforming campaign finance law, including a statewide system for public financing of campaigns. *Photo by Gazette file.*

where big money special interests drive Albany's policy agenda. It is essential, as the Commission suggested, that New York adopt a public financing system similar to New York City's successful program, to elevate the voices of average New Yorkers."

The group of 22 civic leaders, government watchdogs, and prosecutors argues that that controversy itself is a side note to the larger issue: the Moreland Commission exposed the degree to which big money influences public policy in New York, and laid out detailed recommendations for reform, including for a statewide public financing system that matches the donations of small donors.

The signatories to the letter — which includes Hazel Dukes of the NAACP, Nassau County District Attorney Kathleen Rice, Albany County District Attorney David Soares, and New York City Public Advocate Letitia James — are stressing the point that next year's Legislature will have the opportunity to put those recommendations into effect, after failing to do so this year.

Rice, who served as a co-chair of the Moreland Commission to Investigate Public Corruption, said the Moreland Commission's investigations confirmed that New York politics is inundated with the influence of special interest money.

"We put forth smart reforms to fix the problem — most importantly, a public financing system to give average voters the voice they deserve," Rice said. "New Yorkers demand that making those reforms a reality should be the first item on lawmakers' agenda this legislative session."

The letter that was sent to every major candidate for the state Legislature, including incumbents and challengers, states that "The Moreland Commission's work has ceased, and the Legislature failed to act last year on this critical recommendation. But that does not mean that the issues have gone away, or that its recommendation cannot be adopted by the legislature next year."

A voluntary program for candidates that matches small donations with public funds will encourage small donors to contribute and participate in the electoral process, the group writes in its letter to the candidates.

"At the NAACP, we have said for years that Albany's elected officials have to be more accountable to the communities that they are elected to represent," said Hazel Dukes, president of the NAACP New York State Conference and a member of the NAACP's National Board of Directors. "This letter makes crystal clear that on day one of the 2015 legislative session, elected leaders should be focused on reducing the influence of big money in our political system in order to bring the power back to constituents in their district."

New York's enforcement of campaign finance laws is notoriously lax, leading to corruption and abuses of the system. The group maintains that a new, sufficiently-funded, truly independent oversight and enforcement body with strong responsibility for all campaign

finance law administration, including public financing, would go a long way toward ending the most common type of corruption in Albany.

"Voters are routinely disappointed by the self-interest and corruption which define our state capital," said Susan Lerner, executive director of the good government group Common Cause New York. "Reform candidates for office can raise the standards of our democracy by setting an example for their opponents, and the public. It's a winning platform to commit to the recommendations of the late Moreland Commission which are more relevant than ever."

New York state's loopholes and exorbitant contribution limits encourage politicians and parties to seek huge sums from their contributors. The group says there needs to be "reasonable" limits on contributions to all candidates and parties that will allow citizens to show their political support without being extorted for unlimited donations.

"It is past time for our elected leaders to step up and enact comprehensive campaign finance reform. As this election season is reminding us, the state's campaign finance system is broken," said Dick Dadey, executive director of the government watchdog group Citizens Union. "Candidates who commit to enacting the Moreland Commission's recommendations and passing comprehensive campaign finance reforms are also committing to helping heal the public perception of the undue influence of big money contributions on campaigns."