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Oakland Public Ethics Commission Postpones Democracy Dollars Program Launch for 2024

Commission exploring public financing alternatives for 2024 Council District Elections

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July 13, 2023 — Last night the Public Ethics Commission (PEC) voted unanimously to postpone distribution of Democracy Dollars vouchers for the 2024 election cycle.

The Democracy Dollars program was established by Oakland voters with the passage Measure W, the Oakland Fair Elections Act, in November of 2022. The Program establishes a newly designed public campaign financing program that disperses \$100 in Democracy Dollar vouchers to eligible Oakland residents who can then assign the Dollars to the candidate of their choice. The Program is modelled after Seattle’s pioneering Democracy Vouchers public financing system and is designed to address recommendations in the Commission’s 2020 [Race for Power report](#) to make Oakland elections more equitable.

Measure W called for the Oakland Democracy Dollars Program to be implemented for the 2024 election cycle but permitted the City to cut Program funding and staffing upon finding the City is facing an “extreme fiscal necessity.” In light of the significant fiscal deficit the City was facing, the Public Ethics Commission proposed a scaled-down pilot of the Democracy Dollars voucher program applicable to Council Districts only in 2024. However, the Fiscal Year 2023-2025 Oakland Budget did not include funding for the Democracy Dollars Fund for the 2024 election cycle.

“The Public Ethics Commission put in significant work to launch Democracy Dollars on schedule, but with no funding appropriated in the Budget to send out the vouchers, we had no choice but to postpone the Program for 2024,” said Commission Chair Ryan Micik. “However, we remain fully committed to delivering the reform Oaklanders voted for, and we will be working hard to ensure a successful roll-out of the Program in 2026.”

While the Commission did not receive funding for Democracy Dollars in the 2024 election cycle, it did secure startup funding to design the database that will be used to assign, track, and process vouchers, as well as a Program Manager position to oversee the work. The Budget also includes some discretionary funding which can be used to re-establish a more limited public financing program, which has been available for City Council District candidates for over two decades. The Commission directed PEC staff to bring back options for establishing a limited public financing program as a stopgap for the 2024 election only, so that there is no break in the availability of public financing in Oakland.

“Democracy Dollars is a critical Program for ensuring all Oaklanders have a voice in their local democracy,” said Nicolas Heidorn, Executive Director of the PEC. “While we are disappointed to not launch the Program in 2024, the delay gives us the opportunity to do additional outreach to Oakland’s diverse communities and to be more deliberate in how we design the Program.”

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About the Public Ethics Commission

The Public Ethics Commission ensures compliance with the City of Oakland’s government ethics, campaign finance, transparency, and lobbyist registration laws that aim to promote fairness, openness, honesty, and integrity in city government.

www.oaklandca.gov/pec