



North County Group
Sierra Club San Diego
P.O. Box 2141
Escondido, CA 92033

December 15, 2019

Mayor Paul McNamara and Council Members
City of Escondido
201 N. Broadway
Escondido, CA 92025

RE: SUPPORT reduced donor limits and request for changes to Escondido's election rules

Dear Mayor McNamara and Council Members,

Sierra Club North County Group appreciates the agenda item on the December 18 agenda related to elections. This is a topic very important to Sierra Club. The Sierra Club National Board has set several goals for Congressional campaigns that apply equally to local government here. These include shifting political power toward voters and volunteers and away from wealthy self-funded candidates and large contributors and improve quality of candidates for Congress by reducing the role of money in elections among others.¹

In this light, we are very supportive of key reforms for Escondido and offer a few electoral recommendations related to campaign limits, timing, and frequency of elections we believe would serve Escondido residents well in future elections.

1. Support the recommended \$250/\$800 Campaign Contribution Limits

This is a critically important topic and one where Escondido has been far outside the norms under the previous administration. Escondido's individual limit of \$4,300 per election is simply outrageous and, as noted in the staff report, far out of the norm for a city our size. Further, it contributes an overt demonstration or perception of undue influence of the corporate and development interests that have plagued our city for the past decade. They must be lowered if we want fair, uncompromised, and representative elections and restored faith in Escondido elections.

Reasonable campaign limits are a key to more representative government. With high limits, corporations (in our case generally development interests) are able to 'invest' in campaigns and buy influence. This undermines the ability of the general public to have meaningful influence in elections. A person's candidacy should not be determined by the size of their wallet or the number of development and corporate interests willing to pony up donations in the \$1,000s of dollars. High campaign limits disenfranchise people who may have wonderful community connections and policy ideas, but who don't come from wealth and who's policies may not favor corporate or special interests. **Therefore, we strongly support the recommended limits of \$250/\$800 campaign limits for city elections**

¹ <https://www.sierraclub.org/sites/www.sierraclub.org/files/financereform-votingsystems.pdf>

2. Remove the incumbent ‘war chest’ advantage during this transition.

As the city moves to a lower limit, the advantage of campaign funds raised under the \$4,300 limit should be removed. If not, incumbents may begin their next race with significant accumulated carried-over funds--in one case, as much as \$30,000 for a district election—creating a very unfair advantage. The city should act to level the playing field. We are not certain the best way this could be accomplished but either requiring that campaign funds be donated or limiting the carry-over from election to election would be two options we would ask the city to investigate.

3. Adopt an extended, 24-month version of the San Marcos timing prohibition.

We support the adoption of a San Marcos-like restriction on contributions when a matter of material financial benefit is under consideration by the Council. However, we recommend that it be extended to 24-months. A current example may be helpful. Principals of a development company with a current project under consideration have donated an additive \$12,000 to at least three candidates. Even though not all of these candidates won, it was donated over a year ago so would meet the San Marcos standard, but would have had, at least the appearance, of a conflict as this issue comes up for consideration.

4. Add a primary election to ensure the winning candidate has the support of a majority of voters.

National Sierra Club also has an adopted policy related to Congress stating, “... *The single-round, winner-take-all political process has problems. We support alternative electoral methods that better reflect the diversity of public opinion.*”² The single-round election in Escondido is also a problem. As Escondido rises in size and influence in the region, it is time for the city to move off the one election-takes-all approach. The city should be added to the March primary so that the final, general election winner would truly represent a preference of a majority of the voters. Without that, it is likely that representatives can be elected with percentages of voter support far lower than a majority. **It is instructional to remember that in 2010 the Mayor of Escondido was elected with 37.8% of the vote.**

5. Move the Mayoral election to coincide with the Presidential election cycle.

It is well-known the most people vote in the Presidential general election. As such this election is more representative due to higher voter turnout. It would also benefit voters as a majority of the governing body would be elected in the election with the highest voter turnout. We recommend that this could be implemented by making the next mayoral term for two years, and then another four-year term starting with the 2024 cycle.

6. Include Vista’s prohibition on ‘laundered’ donations

The city of Vista includes a clear prohibition on any donations that do not carry the correct and legal name of the contributor.³ This is a wise preventative measure the city should adopt.

² <https://www.sierraclub.org/sites/www.sierraclub.org/files/financereform-votingsystems.pdf>

³ VistaMC Section 2.34.060(C)

In closing, excessive money in politics is one of the largest hurdles related to protecting the environment. But, from our decades of experience, Sierra Club knows that protecting the environment, clean air, clean water, and environmental justice are not partisan issues. All people want a healthy, beautiful place to live. However, the disconnect between what we know to be overwhelming public support for the environment and actions of many elected officials which do not honor that, is due to the massive amounts of corporate and wealthy donor money influencing our election process. In addition, the timing of donations and elections are also important to ensuring true representation of voters.

We thank you for bringing this item forward. Please let us know how we can assist you in this. Please contact me at political@sierraclubncg.org with questions or for more information.

Sincerely,
Christine Nava, Chair
Political Committee, Sierra Club North County Group

Cc Jeff Epp, City Manager
Mike McGuinness, City Attorney