



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

August 10, 2020

Mayor and City Council
City of Escondido
Via Email

RE: Agenda item # 18: Sierra Club NCG recommendations for Escondido Campaign/Election reforms

Dear Mayor and City Councilmembers,

Sierra Club North County Group would like to supplement our previous comments made in our December 19, 2019 letter. Please find our current recommendations for your consideration below.

1. Request reducing campaign contribution limits to between \$250-500 for council race and between \$800-1,000 for mayoral race

Reasonable campaign limits are a key to more representative government. A person's candidacy should not be determined by the size of their wallet or the number of development and corporate interests willing to amass donations in the \$1,000s.

High campaign limits disenfranchise people who may have wonderful community connections and policy ideas, but who don't come from wealth and whose policies may not favor corporate or special interests.

The staff report mentions that the limits should 'reflect the real conditions of campaigning in this City.' True, but they can also be used to incent the **kind** of campaigning that is good for the city. For example, with lower donation limits, candidates will have to get out, talk to, and secure the support of more constituents. Higher limits allow a candidate to secure the support of far fewer people and, unless we adopt # 2 below, potentially from corporate interests with business in front of the city which undermines our process. As a result, we strongly support the Council adopt much lower limits for campaign contributions.

2. Support limits on contributions from entities with business in front of the City Council

We strongly support campaign dollar and time limitations for persons with decisions in front of the City Council. San Marcos has a working policy (Section 2.16.070) that can be used as a model. As our city moves in a more positive and visionary direction, our decisions must be as 'clean' as possible, meaning the public needs to have confidence in them. This will come with strict limitations on financial beneficiaries of these decisions and not allow undue influence.

Respectfully, the cautions raised in the staff report such as inability to secure a quorum or 'weaponizing' donations are long-shots and should not be weighted heavily. In fact, the presence of the requirement could achieve exactly what is desired— unconflicted decision-makers acting in the best interest of the residents of the city. If a representative wants to vote on

an issue, they shouldn't take campaign donations from anyone with business in front of the Council. This should be exactly what we are trying to achieve.

We have an excellent current example of how this policy would benefit our decision-making. The excessive donations by Safari Highlands LLC to candidates in the up-coming election are a concern that should trouble everyone. In a fair and trustworthy democracy, representatives should be required to refuse donations that could, in reality or appearance, seem to compromise or direct their actions, or recuse themselves. If adopted, this policy would disallow these kinds of donations and improve confidence in our system.

In light of this, we call on candidates Joe Garcia, Mike Morasco, Tina Ostrem Inscoe who have received \$4,300 each in campaign donations and any others who accept campaign contributions from Solana Beach-based Safari Highlands LLC (proposers of Harvest Hills) to let them know they will recuse themselves from any vote on Harvest Hills or Concordia projects or return the money. Without such policy or action, it has the appearance that interests related to developing Harvest Hills are attempting to 'buy' the support of a majority of our City Council.

In addition to the campaign donation discussion, NCG requests the Council schedule the following issues for future consideration.

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

We strongly recommend a city primary 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. Chula Vista also holds a primary election. It is instructional to remember that in 2010 the Mayor of Escondido was elected with 37.8% of the vote. This November Oceanside, the county's 3rd largest city, will select their Mayor from 13 candidates. Increasingly, the larger cities will be well-served by holding primaries.

4. 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.

Thank you for raising this important issue and for considering our views.



Suzi Sandore, Chair
NCG Executive Committee



Laura Hunter, Chair
Conservation Committee