

Pay-to-play passes; vote by council is unanimous

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More than 100 Jersey City residents came to Middle School 4 on Bright Street last night, geared up for a fight over ethics reform that never happened.

The City Council, with all nine members present, unanimously adopted strict limits on campaign contributions from contractors hired to do work for the city.

"I had my boxing gloves in the car ready to go," said Shelley Skinner, one of the principal supporters of the ordinance. "I can't tell you how happy I am."

The pay-to-play measure advanced by Downtown Councilman Steve Fulop is the first of its kind in the city, the result of a petition drive that garnered signatures from more than 2,000 Jersey City residents.

The ordinance limits how much vendors who receive no-bid professional contracts can give to municipal campaigns to \$300 per calendar year, or \$500 per calendar year to candidate committees.

State law permits contributions of up to \$2,600 per election per candidate, with primary and general election contests counting as two different elections, and \$7,200 to county committees.

Fulop received a standing ovation when he addressed the audience.

"If you think back to one year ago we literally got laughed out of the council chambers," he said. "It really speaks to the power of the people."

Several other council members said that while they were voting for the ordinance, they resented any implication that they have been tainted by campaign contributions.

An amended version put forward by Mayor Jerramiah Healy would have raised the limits with the entry of a candidate who earned \$500,000 or more a year or had \$2 million or more in assets. He argued that limiting contributions from city vendors would be unfair to candidates of "modest means."

"I regret that Councilman Fulop rejected our financial disclosure proposal that would have provided for unprecedented transparency and that he refused our attempt to keep a level playing field in elections, which will just make it easier for rich candidates to buy their way into office," Healy said.

Another ordinance, to ban City Council members from collecting a second government paycheck, fell short when the petition organizers were told shortly before the deadline that they needed about 10,000 more signatures because it dealt with payroll.