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News Coverage on Comptroller DiNapoli's Campaign Finance Reform

NY Comptroller Thomas DiNapoli proposes campaign finance changes for his job

[Associated Press](#) [1] [2] [2] [2] [2]

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http://www.syracuse.com/news/index.ssf/2011/06/apnewsbreak_ny_comptroller_tho.ht... [3]

ALBANY, N.Y. (AP) — New York state Comptroller Thomas DiNapoli on Thursday proposed sweeping campaign finance changes for the office following political influence scandals that tarnished the state's top fiscal office under his predecessor.

DiNapoli's proposal for voluntary public financing of comptroller campaigns comes as the rest of state government has gone silent on the need for campaign finance restrictions. Good-government groups have long said out-of-control financing of campaigns is the basis for the ethical lapses and partisan gridlock in state government.

"Elections should be about issues, not about money," DiNapoli said Thursday. "The comptroller's office must be a model of independence and ethics. Strict contribution limits and a level playing field for all candidates for comptroller are a clear signal that this office is for sale."

Gov. Andrew Cuomo and legislative leaders are trying to pass an ethics bill in the closing days of the session, but that bill doesn't change the high cost of campaigning for office and the need to keep raising large sums of money while in office.

DiNapoli's bill, submitted to the Legislature on Thursday, would limit campaign contributions to \$2,000. Currently, individuals and firms doing business with the pension fund that DiNapoli controls can donate tens of thousands of dollars to campaigns. He also would cap primary spending for his job at \$5 million and general elections at \$7.5 million.

“It’s a strong bill, it’s definitely a step in the right direction,” said Mark Ladov of the Brennan Center for Justice, a good-government advocate. He said a program that encourages small donations from more people limits the influence of large donors and can attract more people into politics who don’t have to depend on wealthy benefactors.

To be eligible for the public financing, a candidate would have to meet specific criteria aimed at showing support statewide. If a candidate chooses not to participate in the public matching funds with its spending limits, the opponent who accepts public financing would be able to raise more and receive public matches of the dollars.

Participants also would have to agree to at least one debate and follows rules on how the funds could be spent.

In 2007, the Legislature appointed DiNapoli, a longtime assemblyman, to fill the term of Alan Hevesi after he resigned in disgrace and was later convicted. Criminal cases since then have shown politically connected figures paid fees and campaign contributions in exchange for securing investments from the massive state pension fund. DiNapoli voluntarily set his own restrictions on campaign donations upon taking office.

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