FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
Tuesday, February 12th 2019

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Supervisor Gordon Mar files ballot measure taking on “dark money” in local politics

[San Francisco] On Tuesday, Supervisor Gordon Mar filed the “Sunlight on Dark Money” ballot initiative with the San Francisco Department of Elections, placing the measure on the November 2019 ballot.

“Our elected leaders should be accountable to the public, not to dark money donors, corporations, or big developers,” said Mar, the lead proponent of the initiative.

If passed, the measure would strengthen disclosure requirements for dark money contributions to campaigns. These contributions funnel money from state-level “Super PACs” to local Independent Expenditure Committees in order to circumvent disclosure requirements and hide the true source of donations, leaving voters uninformed about who has paid for campaign advertisements or committees.

“This initiative will accomplish something we can all agree on: voters deserve to know who is spending money to influence our elections. Trust in government depends on it,” said Morgan Aitken-Young, Chapter Leader with Represent Us San Francisco, an anti-corruption group that endorsed the measure.

In addition, the measure closes loopholes for corporate donations, and limits “pay-to-play” contributions from developers who may seek to influence votes on land-use decisions made by the candidates they support.

“The heightened transparency and new rules in the Sunlight On Dark Money Initiative will better inform voters about who is paying for campaign advertisements and disarm attempts to use money to get favorable treatment from City government,” said former San Francisco Ethics Commission Chair Peter Keane, the sponsor of the initiative.

Campaign spending has skyrocketed in recent years following the Citizens United Supreme Court decision that opened the floodgates for corporate and Super PAC donations, with millions of dollars spent each year by groups that hide donation sources while seeking to influence local elections.

“There is no place for dark money and pay-to-play politics in San Francisco and it’s time for the
people to do something about it,” said former Assemblymember Tom Ammiano, the Chair of the Sunlight on Dark Money Campaign Committee.

In addition to lead Proponent Gordon Mar, Supervisors Hillary Ronen, Sandra Lee Fewer, Aaron Peskin, Matt Haney, Rafael Mandelman, Norman Yee, Shamann Walton, and Vallie Brown signed the initiative to place it on the November 2019 ballot, when it will be decided on by San Francisco voters. The Sunlight on Dark Money campaign will be managed by Jon Golinger.

“Faith in government requires faith in our electoral process, and dark money, pay-to-play, and corporate influences are all marks against the trust the public places in us,” said Mar. “Voters deserve to know who is paying to influence their votes. They deserve to decide on these issues themselves, and with this initiative submitted for the November ballot, they will.”

While announcing the ballot measure at Tuesday’s Board of Supervisors meeting, Supervisor Mar also announced he will soon introduce reforms to the City’s public financing program. While details were not yet available, he offered a preview of the legislation, to be introduced in the coming weeks:

“Speaker Pelosi has made it clear that embracing and expanding public financing is at the core of how we can and must protect our democracy and democratic values,” said Mar. “The 116th Congress has made this their first priority by introducing H.R.1, the For the People Act of 2019. While Speaker Pelosi works on the federal level, this Board can lead these reforms on the local level, here and now. I look forward to working with my colleagues on this crucial issue in the weeks to come.”