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Money in politics takes center stage at Supervisor Gordon Mar’s Sunlight on Dark Money ballot initiative hearing

San Francisco - At Monday morning’s Board of Supervisors Rules Committee meeting, Supervisor Gordon Mar held a hearing on the Sunlight on Dark Money initiative to address issues of political corruption and financial disclosures in San Francisco politics. The 2018 Board of Supervisors and Mayoral races were among the most expensive in San Francisco’s history, with record-breaking amounts spent by Independent Expenditure Committees, the local version of Super PACs, attempting to buy influence in local elections.

“With political spending reaching record highs as trust in government reaches record lows, the issue of faith in our political institutions is at a crisis point,” said Supervisor Mar. “There is little question of the cause of this disillusionment. When for-profit interests donate to political causes, it is not from the kindness of their heart. These are investments, and they expect and receive returns on their investments. Corporate contributions, pay-to-play politics, and dark money donations are all marks against the faith the public places in us, and have real, concrete consequences.”

The hearing featured testimony from former State Senator Quentin Kopp, who recently resigned from the Ethics commission to endorse and campaign for the Sunlight on Dark Money initiative; former Assembly member Tom Ammiano; Friends of Ethics founder Larry Bush; and former Chair of the Ethics Commission Peter Keane, who helped write the initiative; and detailed recent examples of political corruption in San Francisco, including the FBI investigation of the “Shrimp Boy” scandal, and a pattern of coordinated donations from real estate development executives to candidates who would later be responsible for approving their projects.

If passed by voters in November, the Sunlight on Dark Money initiative would address some of the clearest forms of potential corruption by banning all corporate contributions to candidate committees and banning “pay-to-play” donations from individuals with financial interests in large-scale development projects to candidates who could later vote to approve those projects. In addition, it would create the strongest “dark money” disclosure laws in the nation, by piercing the shell of IECs and Super PACs that funnel money between multiple committees to hide the true source of political contributions. Currently, if one committee is funded by another, the original funders remain anonymous on political ads. The initiative would change this, by requiring disclaimers on those ads that list the top contributors, the amount of their contribution, and -- if one of the top donors is another committee -- the top donors to that committee.

“This is a fundamental, basic, and essential idea: voters deserve to know who’s trying to buy their votes,” said Mar. “The public deserves to know that our democracy is not for sale, our politics are not for sale, and our City is not for sale.”
The ballot initiative, which will now go before voters in November, is part of a set of electoral reforms Mar has made early priorities in office, including two ordinances he’s authored to expand the City’s public financing program for elections.

“With Sunlight on Dark Money, we will end corporate contributions, address pay-to-play politics, and pass the strongest dark money disclosure law in the nation. Our work doesn’t end there, and I’ve authored another ordinance expanding public financing that will appear before the Board of Supervisors in September,” said Mar. “Together, these reforms will tackle money in politics in a comprehensive way to expand political equality and ensure all people have a voice in the decisions that impact their lives. Following the Citizens United decision, we can't stop the influx of money in politics, but we can bring it out of the dark, and this initiative is a crucial and groundbreaking step forward.”

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