



## More than 27,000 Burqueños Support Community Effort to Improve Public Financing System

*“Democracy Dollars” Ballot Push to Give Power Back to the Voters, Encourage Participation*

***For Immediate Release:***

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**Albuquerque, NM, Tuesday July 31,** – A group of fair election advocates submitted more than 27,000 signatures from Albuquerque voters today—the first step in a push to put the power to decide who represents the city back into the hands of the voters and improve the city’s public finance system.

Once the signatures are certified by the city clerk, city voters will have the opportunity to approve “Democracy Dollars” in a vote on the November ballot, putting in place a program that will allow voters themselves to direct public funding to the city candidates of their choice. The program, which will use an existing city public financing fund, will strengthen publicly financed candidates’ ability to compete with the big money spent by privately financed candidates and PACs.

Almost 70% of city voters supported public financing in 2005, allowing candidates who wish to participate to receive a stipend if they agree to limit spending and not accept private contributions. The idea was to decrease reliance on big contributions from special interests. But the system today is under-used thanks to a Supreme Court decision that outlawed “triggered” matching funds—extra money for publicly financed candidates that helped them compete with candidates who raise huge, private donations.

Every year, fewer and fewer mayoral candidates take public financing: they know it’s harder to compete under current rules. In 2009, the first year public financing was available, all three mayoral candidates used the system. However, in the 2017 mayoral election only one candidate took public funding. Meanwhile, privately funded candidates rely on a few big contributors. In last year’s city election, fewer than 350 donors gave three quarters of all cash contributions, with the average from each individual amounting to about \$3,000.

The new program uses \$3.1 million from the Open and Ethical Elections Fund to send every qualified resident a coupon valid for one \$25 contribution to a publicly financed candidate of their choice. Candidates and their campaigns can “raise” this money by reaching out to everyday Albuquerque voters, not the usual group of wealthy donors and PACs. Voters give their contributions to candidates by filling in the candidate name, signing the voucher, and either giving it to the candidate or mailing it to the City Clerk.

“Democracy Dollars puts the power of public financing directly in the hands of Albuquerque’s citizens and gives them greater choice,” says Heather Ferguson, co-director of ABQ Democracy Dollars. “It will increase participation in the local election as it has in Seattle where the system is in place, and it will give candidates a reason to reach out to ordinary voters not just big donors, who do not tend to be representative of our diverse, vibrant community.”

For candidates, there is another benefit, Ferguson says. It gives them the freedom and the time to put down the phone, knock on doors, meet ordinary voters and talk about local-- not special--interests.

## **Background**

Under the current system, City Council candidates who take public financing receive \$1 per voter in their district—usually around \$35,000. Mayor candidates get \$380,000. Recent private candidates have raised \$1 million or more. It used to be the case that if a public candidate's opponent raised more money, the public finance fund would match it—making it harder to buy a victory. But the Supreme Court decided that was unconstitutional. The public finance system that nearly 70% of Albuquerqueans voted for has placed publicly financed candidates at a disadvantage ever since.

Instead of talking to voters, most candidates currently spend their time talking to wealthy donors—and with no matching funds, fewer and fewer even use public financing. Democracy Dollars is a solution because it gives candidates the freedom, and the incentive, to talk to the people again. Democracy Dollars makes the average Burqueño a political donor in a position to support the candidates they believe in at a broader level. In addition to voting, contributing gives average voters more say so in electing candidates.

If voters approve the program, the City will follow a five-step process for each election:

### **The 5-Step Process:**

- 1. Eligible Residents Get Democracy Dollars in the Mail.** If you're registered to vote, this process happens automatically. If not, you can apply with the Clerk to receive your Democracy Dollars.
- 2. Candidates Qualify for Public Financing.** To accept Democracy Dollars, candidates must qualify for the public financing program, by collecting a set number of \$5 qualifying contributions and signatures.
- 3. Residents Give Democracy Dollars to Candidates.** To give your Democracy Dollars to a candidate, just write in their name and the date. Then sign your coupon and either give it to the candidate or mail it to the City Clerk.
- 4. Clerk Verifies Signatures and Gives Each Campaign Their Democracy Dollars.** The Clerk's office already has the ability to verify that your voter information matches the information on your voter registration and/or your Democracy Dollars coupon. Then, they will distribute the amount of redeemed Democracy Dollars to each campaign that has collected them.
- 5. Public Reports Provide Transparency.** Each candidate files regular reports showing how many Democracy Dollars they raised—and how funds are being spent.

Albuquerque would not be the first to implement a Democracy Dollars system to address election fairness and engage under-represented populations. It is a tested and proven approach. When [Seattle](#) implemented the system in 2017, grassroots participation in publicly financed campaigns increased 230 percent and in 2017 the number of total contributors increased 300 percent. All but one candidate used public financing—that’s a system that works. Currently, Austin, Texas and Albuquerque are planning to put Democracy Dollars on the November ballot.

For more information, visit <http://www.burquebucks.com>

For information on the Seattle Democracy Voucher Program, please visit: <https://www.seattle.gov/democracvoucher> or for inquiries, **Wayne Barnett, Executive Director** (206) 684-8577.

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### ***About***

*This direct voter initiative is a project of ABQ Democracy Dollars, a coalition of community groups including Common Cause New Mexico, the Center for Civic Policy, Equality New Mexico (EQNM), Organizers in the Land of Enchantment (OLE), the South West Organizing Project (SWOP) and the Working Families Party of New Mexico.*