

**Written Testimony of Karen Wharton
Democracy Coalition Coordinator, Fair Elections for New York**

**Submitted to the New York State Legislature
at the Joint Legislative Budget Hearing
Concerning Local Government**

February 15, 2023

Good Afternoon. Thank you for the opportunity to testify in support of full funding in the FY 2024 budget for the new statewide Public Campaign Finance Program. My name is Karen Wharton, and I facilitate the Fair Elections for New York Coalition.

In 2019, the Fair Elections for New York Campaign launched, with over 200 labor, community, grassroots, civil rights and issue-based organizations to win an alternative campaign finance system. In partnership with legislators, we passed the country's most significant campaign finance reform law since the Supreme Court's 2010 decision in *Citizens United*. The law was written by a Commission created by the Legislature in the 2019 budget deal. The Commission's mandate from the legislature was clear - if it did not propose a specific system to allow candidates to run for office without needing to rely on the power of big-money donors at any stage, it would have failed. The Commission met the mandate. The legislature passed the law to create the program as part of the budget in April 2020. The passage was in reaction to a ton of public pressure for over two decades to pass the law, and we were proud to be a part of that effort.

Since 2020, the Coalition has been working to ensure this small-dollar public financing program is successfully implemented and achieves its promise of amplifying the power of everyday New Yorkers in our electoral process. The program was launched on November 9, 2022, by the Public Campaign Finance Board (PCFB) at the State Board of Elections. It is voluntary and allows legislative and statewide candidates who opt in and meet eligibility requirements to receive a multiple match on small contributions they raise from constituents. Several lawmakers of all stripes have already initiated the process of opting in.

In preparation for 2024, the PCFB, headed by one of your own, submitted its agency budget request for SFY 23/24. It requested \$14.5 million to cover the administrative needs of the PCFB and \$100 million to finance the Campaign Finance Fund, the future matching funds.

While we appreciate the executive budget's appropriation of approximately \$39.5 million - \$14.5 million for administrative needs and \$25 million for future matching funds - it remains far less than is requested to establish a robust program and instill public confidence in it.

This program is needed. Big money dominates campaign financing in New York. Last year, the 200 biggest donors in New York gave almost \$16 million to candidates, more than all 206,000 of the state's small donors of \$250 or less. Everyday New Yorkers - people who live in the communities you serve - are aware of this. They may not know how outmaneuvered they are, but they look around their neighborhoods and instinctively know this. They feel their votes don't count. They think that the rich people, the connected people, and big corporations have taken over and have diminished to a whisper the voices of everyday New Yorkers. They feel pay-to-play is rampant. They see significant stadium investments that don't directly benefit them and wonder about their future in this state.

The PCFP gives ordinary people who live paycheck to paycheck a more significant say in the electoral process. They should have a greater say in how their public dollars are spent. Achieving this is easier when there's a strong relationship between elected officials and the people they represent. PCFP does precisely that. The investment in public campaign financing limits the appearance of pay-to-play, which is corrosive to our democracy. In short, public campaign financing improves democracy.

Today, I encourage the Assembly and Senate to set aside your fear about being primaried. Incumbency has its advantages. Do what is right for our state and democracy.

In closing, I commend the budget lines in the executive budget for the PCFB's administrative costs and urge the legislature to increase the funding for future matching funds to \$100 million as requested by the PCFB.

Once again, thank you for the opportunity to testify in support of this reform.