Campaign donation rebate debated

Limit program to voters, some councillors argue

BY JOAN RANSBERRY
Staff Writer

Offering rebates to non-Markham residents who contribute to municipal election campaigns is a misuse of taxpayers' money, some members of Markham council charge.

Following a one-hour debate Tuesday, Markham council adopted a new set of rules linked to the town's election-rebate program, which cost taxpayers $149,700 in 2003.

But the attempt to limit the rebate program to Markham residents only failed.

"People not living in Markham and getting the rebate is a misrepresentation of taxpayers' money," Mayor Don Cousens said. "Some might see it is a way candidates can fund campaigns at the expense of taxpayers."

Councillor George McKelvey agrees with the mayor.

"If I ask someone in Ottawa to give to my campaign, do they really care what kind of service I offer?" Mr. McKelvey said. "Residents living outside of Markham are getting rebates despite the fact that they have no stake in the town."

Thirty-four of the 52 candidates who ran in the last election in Markham took advantage of the rebate program. Similar programs are in place in Toronto, Ajax and Oakville.

A staff report shows 1,101 Markham residents contributed a total of $154,000 to candidate campaigns, while receiving $82,575 in rebates. A total of 895 non-Markham residents contributed $134,150, while receiving $67,125 in rebates.

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Markham paid out more money than Ajax and Oakville because their rebates were limited to electors who lived in the municipalities. Contributors also had to apply for their rebates.

Regional Councillor Jack Heath took part in the 2003 rebate program to help fund his campaign, valued at $75,000.

"Letting all Ontario residents give to campaigns is a way of discouraging a candidate's dependency on contributions from developers," Mr. Heath said. "I took advantage of (the rebate) program in the last election, so did the mayor and so did Mr. McKelvey.

"I did not, however, take any money from developers. At least, three quarters of the issues we deal with are tied to planning and development. I don't want to be sitting there having people think I'm on the hook to developers or anyone in the building and contracting business."

Arguments to restrict the rebates to Markham residents only is "all hog wash", Councillor Khalid Usman said. "It's (the program) in place in other places, including Toronto."

Under the program, those contributing between $50 and $300 will receive a 75-per-cent rebate from the town. If the contribution is for more than $300, the rebate will be on the first $350, plus 50 per cent of the rest, up to a maximum rebate of $350. Meanwhile, council determined that $150,000 is to be earmarked for the program to run from 2006 to 2009.

The names of candidates taking part in the rebate program and the names of candidates not taking part should be posted on the town's webpage, Councillor Erin Shapero suggested.

Frank Edward, Markham's manager of administration, pointed out candidates can choose not to take part in the rebate program. In these cases, a campaign donor signs a consent form stipulating that he or she will not get a rebate.

Council is expected to pass a bylaw authorizing the rebate program in late October.

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