

Baltimore County Fair Election Fund Commission
February 21, 2024
Meeting #1

Meeting Minutes

Samantha O'Neil, senior adviser to the County Executive, opened the meeting at 4:37 pm with a quorum. The members of the Commission and staff began introductions.

Bud Staigerwald, David Mister, Katrina O'Brien, Bernie Tucker, Stephanie Baynes, Jamie E McGuirk, and Marieta English were present.. County staff included O'Neil, Betsy Keim from the Office of Law, Shane Spencer from the Office of Budget and Finance, and Brad Kroner from the Office of Government Affairs.

Following introductions, Keim provided a brief presentation on the Open Meetings Act. She explained that the Commission would be required to document the meeting through minutes or video recording. She also confirmed that one member of the Commission would have to become certified to open and close meetings.

Spencer provided a presentation on the Fair Election Fund itself. Created through local legislation, the fund establishes public financing option for local campaigns for County Executive and County Council. She then proceeded to explain the structure of the fund and how it would work.

Tucker asked whether the Commission would need to receive donations on behalf of candidates. Spencer explained that the Commission would not need to do so.

Spencer explained that the Commission would be responsible for setting the amount included in the fund.

McGuirk asked who the fund would apply to.

Spencer proceeded to explain how the fund would work from the perspective of a candidate. She explained that a candidate may elect to use the Fair Election Fund if they pledge to limit the amount of their donations to small dollar donations, as opposed to larger donations from political action committees or larger campaign donors. The fund would provide matching funds for small dollar donations. Candidates eligible for the fund would be determined by the State Board of Elections.

Spencer then shared that the next meeting of the commission would be focused on setting the amount of money to be budgeted for the fund. She stated that money could be budgeted each year to build up for the 2026 election year, when the fund can be first used by eligible candidates. Donations could be matched beginning in June 2025 for the 2026 election.

Staff distributed a paper handout that describes how money would be allocated and projects how much money may be needed to adequately resource the fund. The handout included examples of fund amounts available in jurisdictions that have an active fund including Howard and Montgomery counties.

Spencer explained that a candidate for County Executive could raise \$750,000 for the primary election and \$750,000 for the general election, for a total of \$1.5 million from the Fair Election Fund. A candidate for Council could raise \$80,000 for the primary election and \$80,000 for the general election, for a total of \$160,000 from the fund.

As the group explained the budget and of the fund, O'Neil and Kroner provided additional context that there is an active County Council Structure Review Workgroup that may recommend expanding the size or structure of the Council – which could impact the fund.

Baynes asked what happens if the fund is underbudgeted or overbudgeted. Spencer shared that the public matching funds would be proportionally scaled down for every eligible candidate accordingly if underbudget. Unspent funds would roll to the next budget year.

Tucker asked whether the group is responsible for establishing the criteria that informs allocation of the funds. Spencer shared that the criteria is mostly established by law.

Spencer then explained the methodology for calculating a projection of \$3.8 million. The methodology assumes that two candidates for County Executive in each party and five total County Council candidates would use the fund in a given election cycle.

The commission then began discussing the need for promoting the fund to the broader public. Keim explained that the group would be tasked with setting their mission statement and developing written materials to promote the fund.

After concluding discussion on the fund and its budget, staff opened discussion of the workgroup's Chair and Vice Chair. The fund must have a Chair and Vice Chair. Staff recommended that interested parties notify other members.

Mister volunteered to serve as Chair, and Tucker volunteered to serve as Vice Chair. Staff said the decision could be made during the commission's next meeting.

O'Neil said that staff would share dates via email for the next meeting in March.

The Fair Election Fund Commission adjourned at 5:32pm, following a motion from Mister and a second from McGuirk.