

# San Antonio Express-News

## Mayor appoints task force on campaign finance

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Mayor Ron Nirenberg on Wednesday informed his council colleagues that he's created a task force to review campaign contribution limits in municipal elections.

The seven-member task force will also consider a proposal from Councilman John Courage that would bolster campaign finance disclosure by requiring candidates to include the occupations and employers of their contributors.

According to a memo obtained by the San Antonio Express-News, Nirenberg has tapped Mike Beldon, a roofing-company owner, to be the chairman. The task force will also include former District 6 council candidate Melissa Cabello Havrda, former District 7 interim Councilwoman Mari Aguirre Rodriguez and Adriana Rocha Garcia, the chairwoman of the Ethics Review Board. The task force will also include representatives from San Antonio College, the San Antonio Stock Show & Rodeo and Frost Bank. Nirenberg thanked council offices in his memo for helping build the task force membership.

"The purpose of this memo is to announce the formation of a task force to review and to advise the City Council on campaign contribution limits, which are regulated under the Municipal Campaign Finance Code. This task force is being formed in response to a recommendation of the City's Ethics Review Board," he wrote. "You will recall that City Council members had previously inquired as to the advisability of raising campaign finance contribution limits, and this task force will review this question. It will provide its recommendations to the Governance Committee prior to the full City Council."

The city's Ethics Review Board, which has been working for two years on potential changes to the ethics code and municipal campaign finance regulations, found that San Antonio's cap on contributions — \$500 per cycle for council members and \$1,000 for mayoral candidates — is "significantly lower" than those of other large Texas cities, according to a February memo from Garcia to Nirenberg and Councilman Manny Pelaez, who'd asked for a review of the limits.

"After careful review, consideration and debate over the findings, the Ethics Review Board recommends that a committee be created to revisit campaign contribution limits," Garcia wrote in her memo. She suggested that the mayor create a council subcommittee and requested that the ERB be included.

In her memo, she recapped previous efforts to reform campaign finance regulations, noting it was originally undertaken in 2002 by a committee created by then-Mayor Ed Garza. The work the ERB has done, she wrote, mirrors that of the 2002 committee.

“Like the previous committee, at the heart of our work is a desire for transparency, accountability and ultimately, a gain in public trust,” Garcia wrote.

But Garcia and the ERB have continually recommended against implementing Courage’s proposal to align disclosure requirements with state and federal law, claiming it would have a “chilling effect” on campaign contributions.

During the course of several ERB meetings, one member suggested that exotic dancers might be less inclined to make campaign contributions if they were forced to disclose their job.

Courage said the ERB’s research into the matter has been one-sided — such as reports tied to the conservative and campaign-finance-regulation averse Koch brothers through the Cato Institute — and intends to offer academic studies that show increased disclosure doesn’t actually have a “chilling effect” on campaign contributions.

“I think that (the ERB) did take a myopic view of that,” he said. “They only really heard one side. Very biased, I thought.”

Courage said he hopes to see his transparency initiative adopted.

“You can’t just say, ‘John Smith gave \$500 or \$1,000,’” Courage said in a Wednesday interview, noting the hundreds of men who may go by that name in San Antonio alone. “If you don’t know who they work for, what their job is, then you don’t know what impact there might be.”

He has argued that disclosing not only the names of contributors but who they work for and what they do would increase accountability and allow the public to see when a particular candidate might have accepted thousands of dollars in contributions from employees of a particular company or from a specific industry.

The mayor said he believes such transparency improves public trust and should be adopted.

“I heard clearly in Governance that there were at least a few of us, myself included, that wanted to see the disclosures acted upon, despite what the ERB recommended,” Nirenberg said.

Pelaez said he agrees with Courage’s proposal. The two diverge, however, on whether contribution limits ought to be increased.

Courage said he’s not willing to negotiate over the transparency proposal and believes that as San Antonio grows, so does the pool of potential donors. That means that there shouldn’t be a need to increase limits, said Courage, who supports publicly funded campaigns.

Pelaez argued that increasing the limit would allow council members to focus more on constituent work than fundraising, especially in off years. But because of the restrictive limits, Pelaez said, council members are forced to work the phones, ask for contributions and hold

fundraisers year-round to capture contributions from the same donors in different contribution cycles (there are two in even-numbered years and more during odd-numbered election years).

Nirenberg's memo did not set out a timeline for when the new task force would meet, or how long it would take to bring recommendations back to the City Council.