



**Statement of Gavin Baker, Federal Information Policy Analyst, OMB Watch
Before the Committee on Government Operations, Council of the District of Columbia
November 2, 2012**

Chair Bowser, members of the committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today on the important topic of campaign finance reform. My name is Gavin Baker and I am a Policy Analyst at OMB Watch, an independent, nonpartisan organization that has advocated for more open and accountable government for nearly 30 years. I think our research can be relevant to the committee's work today.

Councilmembers, when citizens perceive that money can buy access or influence, they lose confidence that our democratic system is responsive to them. A recent poll by the *Washington City Paper* and the *Kojo Nnamdi Show* found that 62 percent of District voters believe that D.C.'s campaign finance system is broken because it gives donors too much influence.¹

The public counts on government to deliver critical public services like education and infrastructure, to protect health and safety, and to make the investments that help grow our economy. If public officials are working for themselves or for special interests rather than the public good, the result is a government that is less effective and less accountable for carrying out those vital responsibilities.

When it comes to reforming the campaign finance system, there are a number of ideas before the committee today. I'll focus on the piece of the puzzle where I have the most expertise, which is transparency. Transparency has to be part of any campaign finance system that includes private donors. Transparency deters corruption, exposes abuse if it does occur, and empowers voters to hold public officials accountable.

The bills before this committee include provisions that would require candidates and others to disclose additional information related to campaign finance. These ideas merit the committee's serious consideration. It's also important to consider how to disclose campaign finance information.

At OMB Watch, we believe that campaign finance information should be easily accessible to citizens. I'd like to make two specific recommendations for the committee to consider.

¹ <http://www.washingtoncitypaper.com/articles/43379/the-politics-issue/>

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The first is to require electronic reporting. The Mayor's proposal, Bill 19-960, includes a helpful provision that would require campaign finance reports to be submitted electronically. The benefits of electronic reporting include greater efficiency, more timely access to information, and improved data quality. Finally, electronic reporting makes it easier to use the information – which brings me to my second recommendation.

The Council should direct the Office of Campaign Finance (OCF) to provide robust and intuitive online tools that make it easier for the public, journalists, and researchers to explore campaign finance information. Americans increasingly expect public information to be accessible online. A recent survey showed that nearly 70 percent of citizens believed that public data should be available online.²

In March, OMB Watch published a report called *Upholding the Public's Trust: Key Features for Effective State Accountability Websites*.³ The report examines state and federal transparency websites and notes five practices that make them work well. Good transparency websites:

1. Are easy to navigate;
2. Have the basic information that most users are looking for;
3. Provide features that help users explore the data, like search tools and graphs;
4. Offer the detailed information that journalists and researchers need; and
5. Let users download the data.

Currently, OCF's website follows many of these practices, but there is room for continued improvement. Without going into too much detail, changes to the user interface could make the site easier to use, graphs or visualizations could help users make sense of the data, and additional download options could improve access.

The Council should make sure that OCF continues working to improve its website. The best results come from an iterative design process, rolling out fixes over time, and incorporating feedback from users. The Council can play an important role here by staying engaged and making sure the Office has the resources it needs.

In conclusion, OMB Watch believes that increased transparency must be a part of campaign finance reform. Two important steps that the Council can take would be to require electronic reporting and to direct the Office of Campaign Finance to make information more easily accessible online.

Thank you for the opportunity to address the Committee, and I look forward to your questions.

² <http://www.socrata.com/benchmark-study/>

³ <http://www.ombwatch.org/upholdingpublictrustreport>