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HEADLINE: New ethics law requires disclosure

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BODY:

Developers and opponents in zoning cases now will have to disclose political contributions of \$ 500 or more to Howard County Council members and the county executive, under a bill signed into law yesterday by Gov. Parris N. Glendening.

State Sen. Martin G. Madden's ethics measure will take effect in October, capping five years of wrangling in the General Assembly and a veto last year by then-Gov. William Donald Schaefer.

The bill is intended to ease concerns of Howard County residents that money has an undue influence over zoning decisions and to make it easier to track contributions from participants in land-use cases to the people who decide those cases.

"It's important the process be perceived as fair and unbiased," said Mr. Madden, a Republican who represents southeastern Howard County. "I think this bill ensures that."

But council members and development industry representatives, who opposed the bill, said the law will have little real effect.

They said campaign contributions already are public and the zoning process is not influenced by money, despite public perception.

"I think nothing will happen except some more paper will be filed," said Bruce T. Taylor, an owner of the 682-acre Waverly Woods II housing and commercial development in Marriottsville.

Council Chairman Charles Feaga called the measure "sort of a mockery" because it doesn't apply to other elected officials whose decisions can affect land use, including state lawmakers and the school board.

"I think it will just be cumbersome," Mr. Feaga said. "It's just showmanship."

The law requires applicants for zoning changes and participants in the county's comprehensive zoning plan process to disclose contributions of \$ 500 or more over the preceding four years to council members or the county executive.

The council also serves as the zoning board, and the executive has influence over growth policies.

Critics say the new law is riddled with loopholes, including exemption of consultants, attorneys and other professionals working with developers and individual employees of development-related businesses.

Mr. Madden argued that covering all such groups was impractical.

Others said the law that passed this year is an improvement over the bill's earlier versions.

Howard Saslow, president of county chapter of the Homebuilders Association of Maryland, said he's pleased that the law includes opponents of zoning changes.

"We've never been opposed to disclosure," Mr. Saslow said. "The issue is impropriety, and perception is reality. Segments of the population believe impropriety is going on. If this alleviates some of those concerns, it's probably a positive bill."

Harry "Chip" Lundy, chief executive officer of Williamsburg Builders, said he contributes to political candidates who support the industry, but not because he expects a payback on a zoning decision. "That doesn't happen in Howard County," he said.

John W. Taylor of Highland, a two-time County Council candidate and advocate for zoning reform and slow growth, said developers have a strong influence on the process. The law will do little to curb that, Mr. Taylor said.

"I think it's a good gesture. . .but practically, I don't think it's going to have an effect," he said.

Common Cause of Maryland, which lobbies for ethics in government, said the law might have a greater effect than Mr. Taylor believes by increasing accountability.

"It's like all the PAC disclosures on Capitol Hill and Annapolis," said David L. Scull, chairman of the issues committee. "It gives the public and media a score card to examine whether public decisions are accompanied by or influenced by campaign money. Connections are always denied, but they keep reappearing."

GRAPHIC: PHOTO, SUN STAFF PHOTO/1994, Sen. Martin G. Madden says law will make zoning process fair.

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