

Money to Run in Maryland

FOLLOWING A significant tightening of controls on lobbyists, Maryland's reform-minded legislators turned their eyes on another target: public financing of state legislative campaigns. They didn't get very far this year. A Senate committee shot down a public funding bill offered by Sen. Paul Pinsky (D-Prince George's). House Majority Leader John Hinson, sponsor of a similar measure in the House, tried to keep the issue alive by proposing a task force to study the idea in preparation for drafting new legislation for the next General Assembly session. His attempt couldn't get out of committee, either. These votes suggest that plenty of incumbents are locked into the system that got them elected. However, this proposal deserves a more serious look.

Though the campaign finance debate on Capitol Hill is drawing most of the attention these days, federal candidates aren't alone in feeling relentless pressure to raise and spend increas-

ing amounts. The influence of big contributors is felt in statehouses as well as in Congress. One logical way to break the cycle is to alter the mechanism for funding campaigns. Opponents of the idea question, among other things, the potential cost to taxpayers. But voters in a number of states, including Maine, Arizona, Vermont and Massachusetts, have embraced public funding. An Arizona state representative, testifying in Annapolis last month, noted that she won election in 1998 using private-source money and then won reelection last year using public financing. The big difference, she said, was not having to accept money from special interests pushing for legislation.

Marylanders know all too well how special-interest money talks to dependent lawmakers in Annapolis. A voluntary public financing plan might not mute this chatter, but an independent source of campaign funds could diminish its influence. That's a idea worth keeping alive.