

Report on campaign finances of Renew Baltimore and PEACE (People for Elected Accountability & Civic Engagement)

Introduction

Maryland campaign finance reports from 2023 of the two groups backing referendums to reduce the size of the Baltimore City Council and reduce Baltimore City's property tax rate are powered by big money contributors, many of whom are located outside the city. There is no evidence that donations to either group represent grassroots efforts by city taxpayers or city voters. There are no public reports of 2024 donations, so the 2023 reports are the most recent available.

In 2023, the referendum promoted by PEACE to reduce the number of Baltimore City Council members from 14 to 8 was financed solely by David Smith, Executive Chairman of Sinclair Broadcasting's Board of Directors, and owner of the Baltimore Sun.

The referendum proposed by Renew Baltimore to shrink the city property tax rate was mostly financed in 2023 by a consortium of big real estate companies and trade associations, as well as individuals who do not live or locate their businesses in the city.

This analysis of Renew donors shows the unfortunate consequence of more than a half century of 'suburban flight' by companies that do business in the city, but house their headquarters in the suburbs, therefore denying the city tax revenue. Donors include Caves Valley Partners, which redeveloped Cross Keys and the Cross Street Market, and has headquarters in Towson and Baltimore real estate company Bozutto & Associates, located in Nottingham. PACs formed by the two big housing trade associations - the Greater Baltimore Board of Realtors and the Maryland Multi-Housing Association - are located, respectively, in Timonium and Owings Mills also supported the effort.

PEACE (People for Elected Accountability & Civic Engagement), a campaign to shrink the size of the Baltimore City Council, led by millionaire David Smith.

The referendum to significantly reduce representation on the Baltimore City Council – cutting the number of council members from 14 to 8 – was solely financed in 2023 by David Smith, a millionaire businessman who does not live in Baltimore City. His organization, People for Elected Accountability & Civic Engagement (PEACE), reported to the Maryland Board of Elections in January 2024 that it collected \$340,000 from Smith the previous year. No other donations are listed.

Smith is executive chairman of Sinclair Broadcasting Group, a Baltimore County company that owns 185 television stations, including the local WBFF-TV, Fox 45. Earlier this year, he purchased The Baltimore Sun.

PEACE's website makes no mention of David Smith. It states, "PEACE is a grassroots movement," though the organization's 2023 contributions contain no donations from any city

residents. The only staff member listed on the website is Jovani Patterson, who lives in West Baltimore. The only address listed on the website is an office outside Baltimore City in Towson. The website appears to be several years out of date because it describes Patterson, PEACE's chairman, as a candidate for Baltimore City Council President, an election he lost in 2020. His bio states, "As city council president, Jovani hopes to continue his lifelong commitment to service and his vocation of solving problems to help address Baltimore's persistent challenges."

Patterson's name has been more recently in the news as the plaintiff in a lawsuit against the Baltimore City School system. Patterson's legal bills are being paid by David Smith. ([Sun owner David Smith behind lawsuit against Baltimore schools - The Baltimore Banner](#))

Renew Baltimore, a campaign to slash city taxes, dominated by the real estate industry and deep pocketed suburbanites.

The referendum to significantly reduce the city's property tax rate over the next several years was organized and has been funded by Renew Baltimore - a group led by the real estate industry – reporting \$244,503 in donations in 2023, according to the Maryland Board of Elections.

Like PEACE, Renew Baltimore is not a grassroots organization, with only a handful of small donations from city residents. A majority of donations, - 98 percent, or \$238,801 – come from people, private companies and Political Action Committees that each donated at least \$1,000.

Contributions from real estate businesses accounted for 64 percent, or \$157,200, of donations.

More than one-third of the donations came from people, companies or Political Action Committees located outside the city – 36 percent, or \$87,600.

Highlights:

Here are highlights of donations from some of the more than two dozen companies (and PACs that represent them) that develop, manage or sell real estate.

Political Action Committees

The **Greater Baltimore Board of Realtors PAC** gave \$23,000 last year. GBBR has 5,000 members, including real estate agents and brokers in the Baltimore region, according to its website. Its offices are located outside the city, in Timonium.

The **Maryland Multi-Housing Association PAC** gave \$30,000 last year. MMHA represents landlords owning multi-family apartment buildings, according to its website. Its offices are located outside the city, in Owings Mills.

Real estate development, management and sales:

Bozzuto & Associates, Inc., a long-time real estate management and development company, gave \$2,500. Its offices are located outside the city in Nottingham.

Caves Valley Partners LLC, a development firm that rebuilt the Cross Street Market in South Baltimore and Cross Keys in North Baltimore, gave \$2,000. While its website promotes the company as “helping transform Baltimore,” its offices are located outside the city in Towson.

Ben Frederick Realty, a company that sells apartment buildings, gave \$15,000. Its offices are located in the city in North Baltimore.

Merritt Management Group Real Estate, a real estate development and management company, gave \$5,000. It is located outside the city in Woodlawn.

Other businesses that donated

CFG Community Bank, which recently moved its headquarters to the city’s newly named “Baltimore Peninsula,” gave \$25,000.

Rukert Terminals Corporation, a long-time East Baltimore shipping company, gave \$15,000. Its website promotes the company as a “world class marine terminal” with a “nonunion workforce.”

Notable individual donors:

John “Jack” Luetkemeyer Jr., a co-chair of Continental Realty, gave \$2,500. He was recently in the news for his donation of \$300,000 to a PAC that supported mayoral candidate Sheila Dixon’s unsuccessful candidacy in the 2024 Democratic mayoral primary. He has also recently donated to Republicans in other states, including Nikki Haley. He lives outside the city in Ruxton. ([Jack Luetkemeyer: Developer's donations fueling Baltimore politics - The Baltimore Banner](#))

Mary Miller, a city resident and former mayoral candidate, gave \$10,000.

Carl Stokes, a city resident and former Baltimore City Councilman, gave \$1,000.

Report by Joan Jacobson and Eric Lewitus, completed 6/6/24

For more detail on donors, please see campaign finance reports for both organizations and a list of Renew Baltimore donors.