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Most candidates for Portland mayor and City Council sent reciprocated contributions to other candidates, raising legal questions

Updated: Sep. 11, 2024, 3:26 p.m. | Published: Sep. 10, 2024, 5:54 p.m.



At least 69 candidates vying to become Portland's next mayor or running for city council sent contributions to other candidates that were reciprocated, according to an analysis by The Oregonian/OregonLive Dave Killen



By [Carlos Fuentes](#) | [The Oregonian/OregonLive](#)

More than three dozen [candidates for Portland City Council](#) and two mayoral candidates made at least 10 contributions to other candidates that were reciprocated, according to data from the city's public campaign finance database analyzed by The Oregonian/OregonLive.

In all, 69 candidates for [Portland office](#) gave more than 900 reciprocated contributions to each other this year, the newsroom analysis found.

Giving to a fellow candidate who gives back is significant for two reasons: Candidates benefit when a fellow Portland resident gives them a contribution, because notching enough local donations triggers big dollar city matching funds. Yet state law prohibits candidates for political office from soliciting donations from anyone by promising to give the person a financial payback.

District 1 City Council candidate Loretta Smith, a former Multnomah County commissioner, was the most prolific giver and receiver of traded contributions, making 41 that were reciprocated. "... I contribute to any candidate whose values align with mine and who makes a hard ask, when I can afford it," she told The Oregonian/OregonLive Tuesday. "It's clear that the new ranked choice voting system and the hardworking people behind the small donor elections program have inspired a spirit of community among so many first-time candidates."

City of Portland candidates who got reciprocal donations

Shows the number of donations each candidate received from a candidate to whom they donated. Candidates for mayor are highlighted in yellow. All others are or were running for City Council.

Page 1 of 4



Candidate	Reciprocal donations received
Loretta Smith	41
William Mespelt	40
Keith Wilson	35
Luke Zak	34
Timur Ender	31
Chad Lykins	28
Christopher Olson	25
Bob Simril	24
Sarah Silkie	23
Tiffany Koyama Lane	23
Steph Routh	22
Theo Hathaway Saner	22
Bob Weinstein	22
Debbie Kitchin	21
Cayle Tern	20
Liv Osthus	20
Jennifer Park	19
Lisa Freeman	19
Eric Zimmerman	19
Jesse Cornett	19

Table: Mark Friesen and Betsy Hammond • Source: City of Portland • [Get the data](#)



District 2 City Council candidate William Mespelt was next in line, making 40 donations that were reciprocated, while mayoral candidate Keith Wilson was third with 35 and District 3 candidate Luke Zak was fourth with 34.

Wilson and Mespelt did not immediately respond to requests for comment.

Zak told The Oregonian/OregonLive, “I didn’t see that there was anything potentially problematic with that, and I think most other candidates are in the same boat, judging by the number of candidates that have supported each other.”

Nothing prohibits candidates from donating to each other’s campaigns, and many candidates have expressed public support for the policy stances of other candidates for Portland city office, making it unsurprising they would also give those candidates a financial boost.

But at least 13 candidates explicitly agreed to trade contributions to help each other reach the donor threshold to qualify for matching funds, according to group email threads obtained by The Oregonian/OregonLive. And at least one campaign finance expert said such a quid-pro-quo likely violates state law.

“If the candidates had consulted with an attorney, then they probably wouldn’t have agreed to (trade contributions),” said Dan Meek, a lawyer and longtime Oregon campaign finance reform advocate.

Reed College political science professor Paul Gronke said candidates’ gaming of the system undermines voter trust. “It’s just dumbfounding that folks did this and seem to think it was OK.”

Willamette Week first reported many of the reciprocal donations and some of the candidate emails encouraging the exchanges.

Under Oregon state law, individuals cannot subject any person to “undue influence” — including giving or promising to give money — with the intent of influencing a person to contribute to a political candidate.

Despite this, at least 13 candidates explicitly agreed to give money to other candidates this summer in exchange for incoming contributions, according to emails and texts obtained by The Oregonian/OregonLive. Many candidates for City Council were trying to gather donations from at least 250 Portland residents to qualify for up to \$40,000 in matching taxpayer funds before the Aug. 27 deadline. Candidates for mayor needed 750 Portland donors to unlock city matching funds.

“Anyone willing to help me get to the next threshold by giving \$5 gets \$5 from me,” District 4 candidate Chad Lykins wrote on Aug. 8 to a listserv group that candidates said included nearly all 98 people running for Portland City Council.

At least 12 other candidates agreed to reciprocate contributions. “I wanted to introduce myself to the thread ... and also offer to coordinate reciprocating donation support,” District 3 candidate Harrison Kass wrote on Aug. 17.

The candidates who agreed to trade contributions include District 1 candidates Cayle Tern and Thomas Shervey; District 2 candidates Mespelt and Sam Sachs; District 3 Candidates Kelly Janes, Luke Zak and Kass; and District 4 candidates Lykins, Michael Trimble, Michael DiNapoli, Eric Zimmerman and Bob Weinstein. Willamette Week reported that District 4 candidate Ben Hufford also agreed to trade contributions.

Liv Osthus, who made 19 contributions to fellow candidates that were reciprocated, is the only mayoral candidate that The Oregonian/OregonLive obtained records showing she'd agreed to trade donations to reach the public funding threshold. "I'll reciprocate donations!" she wrote on Aug. 20, one week before the deadline for mayoral candidates to reach 750 contributors to unlock up to \$100,000 in matching public funds. "My campaign is SO close to 750."

Those reciprocated contributions may have been crucial in helping Osthus reach the threshold for matching funds before the deadline. As of the deadline, Osthus had roughly 755 certified Portland donors, only five above the threshold needed to receive matching funds, according to Susan Mottet, the city's Small Donor Elections director.

Several candidates who agreed to reciprocate contributions defended their actions, saying they did not expect anything in return. "My intention was to help people out," said Sachs, who made 10 reciprocated contributions. "If I could help them out, great, if they helped me out, great. But there was never an expectation of a quid pro quo."

However, emails show a different story. "I've already donated to several candidates and they reciprocated," Sachs wrote to the group on Aug. 8. "If we haven't connected this way let me know or donate and once I see it, I'll donate back."

Candidates who sent large numbers of reciprocated donations, but did not necessarily agree to exchange contributions, also defended their decisions.

District 1 candidate Timur Ender, who made 30 reciprocated contributions but did not explicitly agree to trade donations, said, "I'm entitled to make donations to candidates I like, and I'm proud to have donated to amazing candidates in every district."

Many candidates and political operatives are uncertain about what will happen next or what effect this could have on endorsements from powerful groups.

At least one candidate, Lykins, said he has refunded contributions from other candidates as a precaution. Several candidates have contacted the Oregon Secretary of State's Office for guidance. But Laura Kerns, a spokesperson for the agency, said it won't comment on possible violations until an investigation is conducted. Kerns said the Secretary of State's Office hasn't received any formal complaints about the reciprocated donations and therefore hasn't opened an investigation.

The city's Small Donor Elections office advised candidates to seek guidance from the Secretary of State's Office, Mottet said. "This matter will be presented to the Portland Elections Commission, which is charged with reviewing emerging issues and making recommendations on how to address them," Mottet said in an email.

United for Portland, a business-friendly organization, decided to not endorse Lykins because of his involvement in the group thread. Executive Director Doug Moore said the organization may reconsider its support for other candidates.

“We’re just going to have to have a real hard conversation,” Moore said. “Some of the people that are caught up in this are people whose values we think align with us. But this just forces us to question what we’re going to do.”

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