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New Haven mayoral candidate Jeffrey Kerekes qualifies for clean elections program grant

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NEW HAVEN — Democratic mayoral challenger Jeffrey Kerekes is the first person in the history of the city's clean elections program to qualify for the \$17,000 grant.

Kerekes' success in getting on the ballot for the September primary was the final hurdle he needed to get the Democracy Fund grant.

Kerekes also is getting \$6,952 in matching funds through the Democracy Fund, but that is not a first for the program. Mayor John DeStefano Jr., who is not participating this year, qualified and received matching funds in the two previous elections, said Robert Wechsler, administrator of the Democracy Fund.

Candidates have to cross three hurdles to qualify for both the matching funds and the grant. To qualify for the matching funds, candidates must get 200 donations of at least \$10 and no more than \$350. To qualify for the \$17,000 grant, candidates also must get on the ballot for either the primary in September or the November election. Last, the candidate must have an opponent who has raised or spent at least \$5,000.

Kerekes has met all of those requirements. That final requirement is what prevented DeStefano from getting the grant in the past: He didn't have an opponent who raised or spent \$5,000.

"I'm happy to participate in the program and I'm glad that I qualified," Kerekes said.

Kerekes, who has been a strong proponent of the clean elections program, is among three Democratic challengers who turned in enough signatures this week to qualify for the Sept. 13 primary. Kerekes will be joined by Anthony Dawson and Clifton Graves Jr. in challenging DeStefano in that primary. DeStefano is seeking a 10th term in office.

DeStefano and Graves are not participating in the Democracy Fund program, and Dawson has not yet met all three requirements. However, Dawson could qualify for both the matching funds and the \$17,000 grant if he collects enough signatures. Dawson had 45 donations totaling \$1,105. A fourth challenger, former Alderman Robert Lee, also signed on to participate in the Democracy Fund, but did not qualify for funds because he did not earn 200 donations or get on the ballot for the September primary.

The goal of the Democracy Fund is to level the playing field for candidates and reduce the need for fundraising so candidates can spend more time communicating with citizens.

The Democracy Fund lets citizens play a bigger role by providing 2-1 matching funds for the first \$25 of a contribution. By signing on to the Democracy Fund, candidates must agree to certain rules and restrictions, including not accepting contributions from businesses and political action committees.

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