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CONTACT: Edward Erikson, 202-420-9947, edward.erikson@gmail.com

ST. PETERSBURG CITY COUNCILWOMAN INTRODUCES PROPOSED ORDINANCE TO ABOLISH SUPER PACS AND END FOREIGN CORPORATE MONEY IN LOCAL ELECTIONS

COUNCILWOMAN DARDEN RICE SEEKS “TO PROTECT THE INTEGRITY OF ELECTIONS IN ST. PETERSBURG”

ST. PETERSBURG, FL – City Councilwoman Darden Rice of St. Petersburg, Florida, will introduce this Thursday a proposed ordinance before the St. Petersburg City Council to abolish super PACs and to prohibit spending by foreign-influenced corporations in city elections. The proposed ordinance is the first of its kind in the nation.

“This proposed ordinance is designed to protect the integrity of elections in St. Petersburg,” says Councilwoman Rice, the Vice Chair of the St. Petersburg City Council and a past president of the St. Petersburg League of Women Voters. “The threats to our elections posed by unlimited super PAC spending and foreign corporate money have come to our city’s doorstep. With this ordinance, we can help safeguard our political process and play a critical role in the nationwide movement to reclaim our democracy.”

The ordinance will require corporations that spend money in St. Petersburg elections to certify they are not foreign-influenced, or owned in whole or a significant part by foreign entities. The ordinance will also establish limits on contributions to political action committees, thereby abolishing super PACs in local elections.

In March 2010, the U.S. Court of Appeals for the D.C. Circuit in *SpeechNow.org v. FEC* opened the door to super PACs by holding that the federal law limiting contributions to political committees to \$5,000 per person each year did not apply to a political committee that promised to make only “independent expenditures.” While some federal appellate circuits have followed the *SpeechNow* ruling, the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Eleventh Circuit, which has jurisdiction over federal cases in Alabama, Florida, and Georgia, has yet to rule on this question, nor has the U.S. Supreme Court or the Florida Supreme Court.

Super PACs have nearly doubled in number since 2012, and, [according to the Miami Herald](#), donations to “groups [that] enjoy no limits on individual donations,” such as super PACs, “have skyrocketed” in recent years across Florida. Many campaign finance scholars argue that super PACs have now become vehicles for wealthy donors to evade campaign contribution limits designed to prevent corruption and the appearance of corruption.

Alongside the rise of super PACs, the nation has also witnessed foreign corporate money flowing into our elections as a result of the U.S. Supreme Court’s 2010 ruling in *Citizens United v. FEC*, which swept away longstanding precedent barring corporate money in our political process. For example, in May 2016, Uber teamed up with fellow ride-hailing service Lyft to drench Austin, Texas, in \$9

million worth of election spending in the hope of overturning a city law requiring drivers to submit to fingerprint-based criminal background checks. Then, just weeks later, Uber disclosed an unprecedented \$3.5 billion investment from the Saudi Arabian government, meaning that the Kingdom owns more than five percent of the company, along with a seat on its board of directors. And, in 2014, Chevron spent over \$3 million backing city council and mayoral candidates in Richmond, Calif., a city half the size of St. Petersburg. Chevron — a multinational corporation whose stock ownership changes by the minute — was at the time facing a multimillion-dollar lawsuit from the city over a refinery fire that caused more than 15,000 people to seek medical treatment.

Free Speech For People, a national non-profit public interest organization founded on the day of the Supreme Court's *Citizens United* ruling, helped to draft the proposed ordinance being referred to committee by Councilwoman Rice this Thursday.

“We are proud to be working with Councilwoman Darden Rice in this historic fight for our democracy,” says Free Speech For People Counsel Scott Greytak. “With the passage of this ordinance, St. Petersburg can help lead the way for communities across the nation that are seeking to defend the promise of American self-government: of, by, and for the people.”

“We must end the dominance of big money interests over our elections and ensure that all our voices can be heard,” says Rae Claire Johnson, the Director of American Promise-Tampa Bay, a local non-profit public interest organization dedicated to helping lead the movement in the region to reclaim our democracy. “This proposed ordinance marks an important milestone in our struggle to restore democracy to the people.”

American Promise-Tampa Bay will be holding a public event at 6 pm on Friday, July 22, at Ferg's Sports Bar, 1320 Central Avenue in St. Petersburg, where people can learn more about this proposed ordinance and ask questions. Jeff Clements, Founder of American Promise and author of “Corporations are Not People”, will also be speaking and signing copies of this book.

For further information, [see this oped co-authored by Councilwoman Rice and Scott Greytak](#) which appeared in the Tampa Bay Times on July 18, 2016.