

‘Clean Elections’ funding a success in Maine

By Alison Smith and Ann Luther

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The Page 1 article in the Dec. 11 edition of The Times Record, “Clean Election Fund at a crossroads,” was right on the mark ... at least in its title.

Maine’s Clean Election system is at a crossroads, but that is nothing new. Our decades-long effort to reduce the influence of special interest money in elections has always been challenging, but it is exciting to see how far down that road we’ve come.

Maine has just completed 10 years of successful, publicly funded clean elections, thanks to a citizen-initiated law that passed in 1996. Since its first cycle in 2000, Clean Elections has become the default system used by most Maine candidates. It has made a big difference.

Candidates enjoy close parity in resources because Clean Elections has leveled the playing field. No candidate receives large campaign contributions from any private interest.

Voters have more choices now because few seats are uncontested. More and different people are running for office including more women and young people. Many legislators, including some outstanding leaders, would not have run for office without the opportunity provided by Clean Elections.

Instead of dialing for dollars and attending fundraising events, candidates conduct their campaigns on porches, at bean suppers and in kitchen table conversations about what matters most to Maine people. Candidates and voters alike benefit from these improved, grassroots campaigns.

Public financing of campaigns has also made a difference in Augusta. Many State House advocates find that the corporate interests that hold so much influence in other states simply do not have the same pull here — interests like the chemical and pharmaceutical industries.

Under Clean Elections, lobbyists still lobby, but their influence comes from their ideas and the information they provide, not from financial contributions. Since most candidates don’t accept private contributions at all, the relationship between lobbyists and lawmakers is fundamentally different.

Maine’s system is the envy of reformers everywhere who recognize that public financing of

campaigns is foundational reform, necessary if we are ever to make progress on the pressing issues of the day.

The federal Fair Elections Now Act (FENA) was modeled on our system and is steadily gaining momentum in Congress. First District Rep. Chellie Pingree, D-Maine, is providing leadership on FENA by bringing the Maine story to Washington. Second District Rep. Mike Michaud, D-Maine, is also a co-sponsor.

Here in Maine, Clean Elections has been embraced by candidates and voters across the political spectrum. In each cycle, candidates from all of Maine's political parties and unenrolled candidates participate— more than 80 percent of candidates in 2008. Tens of thousands of Maine voters write the \$5 qualifying contributions to help candidates qualify.

In a recent Critical Insights poll, three out of four Maine voters said that gubernatorial candidates should use the Clean Election system, and a majority said they would be more likely to vote for a candidate who did so. National surveys show similarly high support for public funding.

Much has been made in the press lately of the potential for a shortfall in the Clean Election Fund. Although the law that was passed by voters in 1996 contained a very responsible, incremental funding mechanism that builds the Maine Clean Election Fund over time, funding for Clean Elections has proven to be a road full of potholes.

The fund was designed as a separate, dedicated, interest-bearing fund; but starting in 2002, successive governors and Legislatures used it to pay for other state programs. Instead of the certain funding that the law was intended to provide, we have something closer to “just in time” funding, where the Legislature restores just enough funds in time for the next election cycle.

So far, lawmakers have been pretty good at filling the funding potholes before someone loses a hubcap, and adequate funds have been available to qualified candidates in each cycle.

Today's economic situation poses difficult problems for all state programs, and the Clean Election system has been adjusted in order to save money. Legislative candidates will get by with distributions that are lower than they were in 2006 and 2008, and they will need to collect more qualifying contributions to deposit into the fund. Each new qualifying contribution affirms the value of the system to voters.

Interest in using the Clean Election system is also high among gubernatorial candidates.

For 2010, the qualifying hurdle is much higher than before, and candidates will have to earn the support of more voters in order to tap public funds. It is likely that only a few of the strongest candidates will be successful.

We've come a long way in 10 years of Clean Elections. Now that we significantly improved the rules for candidates, it's time to identify and eliminate other sources of moneyed influence.

For example, Maine's political action committees are allowed to accept unlimited contributions

from any source, and that money can make its way into candidate campaigns. Maine Citizens for Clean Elections will work to bring PAC laws in line with the rest of our largely excellent campaign system.

And let's encourage our U.S. senators, Olympia Snowe and Susan Collins, to support the Fair Elections Now Act and bring Maine-style reform to Washington, D.C.

Once again, Maine can lead the way ... through the crossroads and into the future.

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