

BANGOR DAILY NEWS

editorial

Clean is for Candidates

5/27/10

In 1996, voters were asked: “Do you want Maine to adopt new campaign finance laws and give public funding to candidates for state office who agree to spending limits?” The majority said yes, leading to the creation of the state’s Clean Election funding system that is used by more than 80 percent of candidates for the Legislature.

To expand the program to allow Clean Election money to be used to advocate for passage or rejection of referendum questions is a clear violation of the intent — as well as the letter — of the law passed by voters.

That is why the state’s Commission of Governmental Ethics and Election Practices must shut the door on the expanded use of Clean Election funds.

Today, the commission will act on a request from several Republican candidates to use some of the money they received from the Clean Election program to help pay for radio ads urging voters to vote yes on Question 1, which seeks to repeal a tax reform package passed by the Legislature last year.

The commission must reject this request.

Candidates using Clean Election funds for the House of Representatives who have opponents in the June 8 primary received \$1,504; those running uncontested get \$512. State Senate candidates with a primary opponent get \$7,746; those who are uncontested receive \$1,927, if they run as publicly funded candidates.

In its 2010 expenditure guidelines, sent to all candidates who qualify for Clean Election funds, the Ethics Commission says: “Maine Clean Election Act funds may not be spent to: make independent expenditures supporting or opposing any [other] candidate, ballot measure or political committee.” This clearly prohibits use of the funds for anything other than a candidate’s campaign.

Earlier this month, the Ethics Commission received a letter from attorney Dan Billings on behalf of unnamed Republican candidates. He asked if the candidates could use their Clean Election funds to pay for the radio ads because, he wrote “connecting the candidate to a high-profile referendum question is a good way to bring public focus on the candidate’s campaign early in the year.”

The text of a proposed radio ad shows that the opposite is true — the intent is to urge voters to pass Question 1, with mention of the candidate secondary. Eleven of the 12 lines in the draft text refer to the tax reform question. Only one refers to a candidate.

This clearly is not what voters supported in 1996.

In 2006, the Ethics Commission opened the door to expanded uses of Clean Election funds when it refused to discipline a candidate for running newspaper ads with a focus on urging voters to pass the so-called Taxpayer Bill of Rights and only a secondary mention of his candidacy for the state Senate.

The commission should not compound that error by granting the current request.