

Reopening cash spigot a bad idea

Friday, June 3, 2011 3:49 PM EDT

Even in its initial wording, LD 856, "An Act to Change the Campaign Contribution Limits," drew opposition from Maine Citizens for Clean Elections as being an unnecessary measure that would weaken our state's campaign finance laws.

As proposed by Sen. Seth Goodall, D-Richmond, the bill initially sought to raise contribution limits for county and municipal elections from \$350 to \$750.

But in its testimony on April 29 before the Joint Standing Committee on Veterans and Legal Affairs, the MCCE pointed out the previous Legislature had just raised the limit from \$250 to \$350 for the last election and had allowed for subsequent increases to be indexed to inflation. Its concern is that a threefold increase in two consecutive legislative sessions — from \$250 to the proposed \$750 limit — opens the cash spigot for private contributions far too quickly and by too much.

The very reason for setting the upper contribution limit in the first place is to reduce the influence of wealthy donors — and that's a core principle of Maine's Clean Election Act that voters strongly and consistently have affirmed.

Given that very few individual donors bumped up against the existing \$350 limit in the 2010 local and county elections — with the MCCE reporting "the majority of those maxed-out contributions were from party committees" — we fail to see why the contribution limit should be more than doubled for county and municipal elections.

Now, with a little more than a week remaining before the 125th Legislature adjourns, Goodall's bill has just been amended by Sen. Debra Plowman, R-Hampden, to double the contribution limit to privately funded gubernatorial candidates as well.

The assistant majority leader's amendment to raise the gubernatorial contribution limit from \$750 to \$1,500 was approved Wednesday in a 22-13 vote that largely followed party lines (with only one Democrat, Sen. Bill Diamond of Windham, joining the GOP majority). Even Goodall voted against his own bill in its amended form.

Alison Smith, co-chairwoman of MCCE, makes what we believe is a convincing three-point case for the House of Representatives to reject the amended bill when it comes to the floor for a vote.

First and foremost is that Plowman's amendment did not get a public hearing. It was introduced for the first time on the Senate floor on Wednesday and then pushed through by the majority party before the general public even had the opportunity to weigh in on it.

Is this the "transparency" Gov. Paul LePage promised us would be the hallmark of his administration?

Point No. 2: Just as the limits for local and county contributions were recently raised, the gubernatorial contribution limit was raised 50 percent in 2009 to its current \$750 level (in time for the 2010 election). Now Republicans are hoping to double it to \$1,500 per election (both primary and general). Why? To give Gov. LePage a quick fund-raising jump in his presumed 2014 gubernatorial re-election bid?

Smith says MCCE has the same objection to the gubernatorial contribution limit doubling as it did for the proposed hike in county and local contributions: We just raised the limit, indexed it to inflation and the 2010 race gave no indication the current limit is too low.

That leads to her third objection: The proposed \$1,500 gubernatorial contribution limit puts "big money back into the race for governor" As three polls taken this spring clearly show, significant majorities of the Maine voters surveyed (80 percent, 85 percent and 71.5 percent) support Maine's Clean Elections law and its overriding goal of reducing the influence of wealthy donors and special interests in our elections.

If there's no public move for higher contribution limits or for a larger role for private money in Maine elections, who then is behind this 11th-hour power play by the Republican majority to reopen the cash contribution spigot in such drastic fashion?