

Clean Elections system should not be weakened

Thursday, March 29, 2012

Legislators in Maine have voted to weaken the citizen-initiated Clean Elections Act, and now they are considering raiding the funds Mainers put there to keep elections accessible to all who are interested in serving this state.

Recently, the Maine House and Senate voted to remove the “matching funds” provision from the Clean Elections Act, and declined to amend the law to include a new “requalifying/tiered” option. The bill is headed to Gov. Paul LePage’s desk for his signature.

Last summer, the Supreme Court struck down a provision of Arizona’s clean elections bill – which was modeled after Maine’s law – that allowed for matching funds for legislative candidates using clean elections funding. The Maine ethics commission spent the summer crafting a proposal with the “requalifying/tiered” option, which would allow candidates to qualify for additional funds, without matching funds dollar for dollar – which the Supreme Court deemed unconstitutional.

Unfortunately, legislators declined to include this new provision in the law, effectively weakening the program, which will likely result in a substantial loss of participation.

Although candidates have still registered to use clean elections funds at a similar rate to previous elections for this coming November race, since the deadline to commit is not until April 20, candidates still have time to decide how their campaigns will be funded.

Those in contested races may be concerned about receiving a set, one-time disbursement, when their opponents, if not clean elections candidates, would be free to campaign and raise funds to their heart’s content.

This dismantling of the Clean Elections Act flies in the face of what Maine people have said they want.

A poll conducted by Maine People’s Resource Center between March 17-19 showed more than 69 percent of respondents believe that Maine should continue to have clean elections.

In addition to this continued support, Maine voters approved in the original act in 1996, which also included the provision to appropriate \$2 million each year to the clean elections fund for these state races.

Now, Gov. LePage, in his supplemental budget, is proposing to take \$2.45 million from that fund to pay for other parts of his budget. Stripping these funds shows the Governor has no respect for the Clean Elections system and no respect for the decision made by Maine people to support this revolutionary way of funding elections.

The fund is a dedicated, non-lapsing, interest-bearing account. According to Andrew Bossie, executive director of Maine Citizens for Clean Elections, the intent was to allow funds and interest to build in non-gubernatorial election years to allow for adequate funds in those election cycles.

The Veterans and Legal Affairs Committee recommended this week that the Appropriations Committee move forward with LePage’s proposal.

This current attempt to dismantle the system should not go unnoticed. Maine people who support clean elections need to speak up and let their representatives know that these decisions will not be tolerated.

The clean election system in Maine has allowed many residents to run for office who may not have been able to otherwise. The funds support legislative and gubernatorial candidates from varied and diverse backgrounds, allowing Maine people more options, and hopefully, better legislators in Augusta and better leaders in the Blaine House.

Clean elections were citizen initiated and have long been citizen supported. We hope Mainers will continue to stand up for equal access to office and make clean elections strong in this state again.

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Today’s editorial was written by City Editor Robyn Burnham on behalf of the Journal Tribune Editorial Board. Questions? Comments? Contact Managing Editor Kristen Schulze Muszynski by calling 282-1535, Ext. 322, or via email at kristenm@journaltribune.com.