

VILLAGE SOUP

Matching funds can make a vital difference

Editorial

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As the Maine Legislature moves through the molasses of what is traditionally called the short session, citizens hear little of progress and much of partisan acrimony.

Falling victim to the budget wrangling are a number of bills that are important to the ongoing operations of the state. One of these is LD 1774, An Act Regarding the Matching Funds Provisions of the Maine Clean Elections Act.

This bill, created in response to a U.S. Supreme Court ruling called the Arizona Free Enterprise Club decision, attempts to close a wound left in Maine's public campaign finance law when the federal court struck down provisions that gave candidates limited additional dollars when they were outspent by privately funded opponents.

In a split decision, the Veterans and Legal Affairs Committee recommended a Band-Aid to cover the problem by simply calling for an end to matching funds.

We support an option designed by the Maine Ethics Commission, and endorsed by Maine Citizens for Clean Elections, that would allow candidates to gather enough \$5 qualifying contributions to make it possible for them to re-qualify for additional public funds as the election draws near.

This option was one of two suggested by the Ethics Commission and was approved by a minority of committee members while the majority voted for its own proposal, to strike all language pertaining to triggered matching funds from the law.

Legislators often look to committee leadership to guide their decisions on the bills before them. Committee Chairwoman Nichi Farnham, R-Bangor, said this decision is different. Saying that all legislators are experts in election law, Farnham suggested the committee had fulfilled its responsibility simply by moving a bill into the Senate that could be further amended. This lack of leadership is appalling, considering the number of difficult decisions facing legislators in this season of severe budget challenges.

Maine voters have shown, through their original support of Clean Elections and their recent vote on same-day voter registration, that they value access to the polls and to public office. In an era when private money and narrowly targeted interest groups can spend huge amounts of cash to sway voters, public financing is a necessary part of a healthy democracy.

Voters in all of Maine's 151 House and 35 Senate districts deserve robust campaigns in which all candidates have equal access to media and the public forum. That was the intent of the citizens' referendum that established Clean Elections and its matching funds provisions in 1996, and it is the responsibility of our elected representatives to uphold that intent while observing the demands of the Constitution.

So far, Senate leadership has refused to bring LD 1774 to the floor for discussion and a vote, preferring to wait and see what other options legislators come up with.

Our representatives in the Maine House and especially the Senate must demonstrate leadership and step forward to protect both the mechanism and the funds that allow those candidates whose only deficit is financial to present their qualifications to voters. We need vocal advocacy to lift the deadlock and bring a viable matching funds provision back into Maine law.