

Maine Citizens for Clean Elections

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Clean Election Supporters Call for Full Restoration of Clean Election Fund *Advocates say, “The IOU is DUE!”*

AUGUSTA, ME - Today at the State House, citizen groups were backed by legislators in making the call for the full restoration of the Maine Clean Election Fund. Maine Citizens for Clean Elections (MCCE), a coalition of citizen organizations made the case that money borrowed from the Fund in previous legislatures now needs to be returned. A bi-partisan group of legislators were on hand to join the call to restore the Fund.

“When citizens initiated this landmark campaign finance program, we trusted the Legislature to keep it whole,” stated Barbara Burt, co-chair of MCCE and Director of the Election Reform Program of Common Cause. “With gubernatorial and legislative contests about to get underway, the IOU is due! Now is the time to restore funding and ensure another successful cycle of Clean Elections.”

Jon Bartholomew of the Maine Citizen Leadership Fund added, “This program opens doors for the many qualified Maine citizens who might otherwise not consider a run for public office, and our Legislature is better and more representative because of it. Citizens want to cut the connection between private money and public office, and having a viable Clean Election system is exactly how to do that.”

The shortfall in the Fund projected by the Commission on Governmental Ethics and Election Practice (Ethics Commission) is a direct result of transfers out of the fund that were made during 2001, 2002 and 2003 to pay for other state programs.

A total of \$6.725 million was borrowed from the fund, with only \$2.4 million returned so far. The Ethics Commission estimates that the remaining \$4.325 million would be worth \$4,814,366 today if it had not been removed from the interest-bearing fund.

Representative John Patrick, House Chair of the Legal and Veterans Committee is the sponsor of LD 1941, An Act to Provide Funding to the Clean Election Fund (Emergency) which calls for a partial restoration of \$2 million to the Fund. Rep. Patrick has indicated his intention to amend the bill to call for full restoration. LD 1941 will be heard by the Appropriations Committee at 1:00 p.m. on Wednesday.

“It’s time for this Legislature to repay the debt to the Maine Clean Election Fund,” said Patrick. “It is our job to be responsible stewards, and that means making sure that this popular program gets its money back.”

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In a prepared statement, Rep. Randy Hotham, ranking Republican House member on the Legal and Veterans Affairs Committee, touted the benefits of using the Clean Election option. "I've done fundraising in the past and, while it's not my favorite thing, I would do fine if I had to do it for my campaign. But the Clean Election option is better. It's better for me, it's better for my constituents, and it's better for the state of Maine. It brings back the kind of democracy I learned about in school," he concluded.

Senate President Beth Edmonds stated her solid support for Clean Elections, and for a full restoration of borrowed funds. "I worked to enact Maine's Clean Election law and I was one of the first to qualify as a Clean Election candidate. The people of Maine created the Clean Election Fund," said Senator Edmonds. "I will insist that this year's budget provides the resources necessary to support all candidates who qualify."

Representatives from several other partner organizations from Maine Citizens for Clean Elections joined Wednesday's press conference and hearing. Colleen Tucker, a board member and volunteer director of the League of Women Voters of Maine testified on the League's behalf.

"Thanks to Clean Elections and other voter-friendly laws, Maine is a leader in the voting rights arena," Tucker said. "Every League in the country is aware of our groundbreaking public funding system, and many state and local groups are working on their own reforms modeled on Maine's. We have set the standard for reform. What's even more important is that we have made it work." Referring to the need to protect the Clean Election Fund from future borrowing that might jeopardize future election cycles, Tucker asked that the Legislature take steps to ensure that "the amount allocated to Clean Elections is not subjected to political negotiation or partisan pressure with each electoral cycle."

Jesse Graham of the Maine People's Alliance said that Maine citizens support Clean Elections in several ways. "Not only did we vote for it, but we also check "Yes" for Clean Elections on our tax forms and we write Qualifying Contributions of \$5 to candidates we support. We are counting on Governor Baldacci and the 122nd Legislature to return our money so that candidates can focus on voters and not donors this year."

MCCE co-chair Burt called attention to the flurry of supportive editorials published in Maine's daily newspapers over the last month. "From Biddeford to Bangor, the message is the same. Restore the Clean Election Fund now."

MCCE is a nonpartisan coalition that was formed in 1996 to study the problems of money in politics in Maine. MCCE spearheaded the citizen initiative that included the Maine Clean Election Act and other campaign finance reforms. The group, which includes the League of Women Voters of Maine, Common Cause/Maine, AARP/Maine, Maine People's Alliance and many others, is a very active monitor of the Clean Election Act, its administration by the Ethics Commission and legislative efforts to make changes to the Act. It is staffed by the Maine Citizen Leadership Fund, a nonprofit organization in Portland.

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