



Testimony before the Joint Standing Committee on Veterans and Legal Affairs

LD 1561 – An Act to Enact the Maine Citizens’ Initiatives Clean Election Act.

May 8, 2017

Senator Mason, Representative Luchini, and members of the Joint Standing Committee on Veterans and Legal Affairs:

Thank you for the opportunity to testify on LD 1561 – An Act to Enact the Maine Citizens’ Initiatives Clean Election Act.

My name is Bob Howe of Howe Cahill. I am here today on behalf of Maine Citizens for Clean Elections. We are pleased to testify in favor of LD 1561.

We commend the sponsor, Representative Corey, for this very timely bill. The news is full of stories about how special interest money drives many ballot initiatives, as the members of this committee are well aware.

Before long we will celebrate 20 years of Clean Elections in candidate races. Public funding ensures that good candidates can have a shot at running for office even if they don’t have deep pockets. It also promotes issue-oriented campaigns, and direct discussions about what our state needs to move forward. It helps mitigate the role of big money coming in from out of state.

Just as people have long objected to the role of outside money in candidate elections, more and more voters are concerned that out-of-state interests have co-opted Maine’s citizen initiative process to pass self-serving laws. LD 1561 is based on the same idea as the Clean Election Act – that campaign funding that comes with no strings attached can improve our elections and allow our democracy to thrive.

People are rightly concerned about big money dominating our legislative process, whether it is voters or elected officials who are making the laws. We welcome the opportunity to reinforce the value of using Clean Election-style public funding as a mechanism to push special interests out of Maine’s elections.

There is no better way to get big money out than by providing an opportunity for small donations to fund elections. Empowering ordinary people to pitch in and pool their donations to leverage limited public funding for initiatives is an exciting idea. Voters, not big-money donors, should always be in the driver’s seat in our elections, and this could be another tool in Maine’s democracy tool kit.

While there are many proposals under consideration for curtailing the citizen initiative process,

we believe it is worth exploring a way to make that process fairer and more democratic without unduly burdening people who are simply petitioning their government.

Our comments today on LD 1561 are at a high level, but if there is appetite in the 128th Legislature to tackle this bill, MCCE would be happy to share our two decades of expertise with the sponsor and the Committee. We would encourage folks to be ready for a long journey. As we have seen with the Clean Election Act, proponents should anticipate a decades-long commitment to defending, monitoring, evaluating, and tweaking as necessary to make sure the law works as intended.

We appreciate the sponsor and all the co-sponsors for recognizing the problem, identifying this possible solution, and bringing this bill forward. We will gladly work beside anyone who is ready to combat money in politics in order to secure elections and government that are truly of, by, and for Maine people.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify. I would be happy to answer any questions or provide additional information for the work session.