



Testimony before the Joint Standing Committee on Veterans and Legal Affairs

An Act To Change Municipal Campaign Contribution Limits

Monday, March 30, 2015

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

Maine Citizens for Clean Elections offers testimony in support of LD 617.

My name is Bob Howe of Howe, Cahill & Company, and I am here today on behalf of Maine Citizens for Clean Elections. Maine Citizens for Clean Elections (MCCE) is a nonpartisan organization that works in the public interest on our campaign finance and reporting system.

MCCE believes that strong campaign finance laws work to protect government of, by and for the people by reducing the influence of big money in government, eliminating corruption and the appearance of corruption, increasing public access to information, and allowing candidates to compete more equitably for public office. We hold that well-crafted contribution limits are consistent with those goals.

We support contribution limits when they are set low enough to reduce the influence of wealthy donors but high enough to allow candidates to amass the resources they need to run competitive campaigns. Contribution limits do not need to be set so high that candidates can be assured of raising more money than any imaginable, self-financed opponent. Evidence from other jurisdictions shows that, while successful candidates need enough money to be competitive, they do not need more money than any or all of their opponents to win.

Contribution limits in municipal and county races were raised in 2011 under LD 856, which raised those limits from \$350 to \$750. This was a substantial increase, especially considering that the 124th Legislature had just raised the limit from \$250 to \$350 for the previous election. There was absolutely no evidence at the time supporting the need to raise contribution limits for municipal and county races.

A cursory examination of contributions in the 2010 elections for County Commissioner and District Attorney reveals that candidates in just a handful of races raised any significant amount of money at all. In those races where money was a factor, very few individual donors bumped up against the then-existing \$350 limit, and the majority of those maxed-out contributions were from party committees.

Looking afresh at the DA races from 2014, we find little changed. There were something like 135 individual donors in those races, only eleven of which exceeded the contribution limit that would have applied but for the 2011 increase.

While fundraising from individual donors was limited, several candidates contributed personally and significantly to their own campaigns. In 2014, more than half the money raised in DA races overall was from the candidates themselves. This suggests either unwillingness by candidates to engage in vigorous fundraising for election to these offices or unwillingness by donors to provide financial support to candidates in these races.

If this reliance on self-funding meant that only those candidates with the personal financial resources to self-fund their campaigns could afford to run competitive races, then that would indeed be a problem. But there is no indication that raising the contribution limit is the solution since very few donors gave the maximum under either the old limit or the current limit and the tendency of candidates in these races to self-finance continues.

A better approach would be to offer public funding for municipal races, County Commissioner, District Attorney, and Sheriff, but perhaps that is too big a proposition for today.

When LD 856 got to the floor in 2011, it was amended to raise contribution limits in gubernatorial races from \$750 to \$1,500 – obviously a huge and much more consequential change than the change for municipal and county races. We suspect that the bill to raise municipal and county limits was nothing more than a Trojan horse – a vehicle for raising contribution limits in the gubernatorial election. To repeat, there was no evidence whatsoever that the municipal and county limits were too low. We therefore urge you to restore lower contribution limits in municipal and county elections.