



TO: The Honorable Senator Richard Rosen, Senate Chair
The Honorable Representative Patrick Flood, House Chair
The Joint Standing Committee on Appropriations and Financial Affairs

DATE: March 20, 2012

RE: Maine Clean Election Act

Thank you for the opportunity to speak today. I am Alison Smith, President of Maine Citizens for Clean Elections, a nonpartisan organization that has worked on campaign finance reform here in Maine since the early 1990's.

The Maine Clean Election Act was initiated by citizens and approved by voters in 1996. The referendum, which asked, "Do you want Maine to adopt new campaign finance laws and give public funding to candidates for state office who agree to spending limits?" won with more than 56% of the vote, and majorities among women and men, Republicans, Democrats and Unenrolled voters and in 15 of 16 counties.

The law that citizens passed created an adequate Fund that would not require the state to go looking for large sums of money in any particular budget year. What voters approved was an incremental funding scheme that included seven streams of revenue all directed into the Maine Clean Election Fund. What voters approved was ***a special, dedicated, nonlapsing fund with any interest generated by the fund credited back to the fund.*** The biggest stream of funding was the \$2 million annual allotment from the General Fund. That's what people voted for.

The current administration is not the first to propose cutting the allotment or raiding the Fund. Almost from the beginning and over all the years since, successive legislatures and governors have used Maine Clean Election Fund dollars for other state programs. In fact, there is an outstanding debt to the Fund of almost \$3 million in money borrowed but not yet repaid. Had the statutory funding mechanism been honored, the Fund would be still in great shape today.

But this time is different. The cuts proposed today cannot be viewed outside of the context of the policy roll-backs passed by this legislature. This biennium marks the first in Clean Election history in which a governor and a legislature have presided over a significant diminution of the Clean Election program. While prior episodes of cuts to the Fund have been characterized as borrowing, always with the understanding that adequate monies would be returned in time for the next election, we fear that this time it may appear to some that the weakened Clean Election program won't ever need these funds.

We hope that's not what you are thinking. This law is too popular, too valuable, and too important to Maine people for you to allow it to decline. We have seen serious attempts to repeal or partially repeal the law in this legislature, and while those bills failed, it appears that there is another effort to achieve the same result with a death by a thousand cuts, and this proposal is part of it.

By failing to adequately address the loss of matching funds, the 125th Legislature has diminished the Clean Election system at the same time it doubled private contribution limits to candidates for governor who choose the private funding route, and at the same time that it failed to pass – or even seriously debate – much-needed PAC reform. The weakening of Clean Elections only means a bigger role for private special interest money in our elections, and that is not what Maine people want.

Maine people built the Clean Election Fund. That \$2 million per year allotment costs us each about \$1.50 a year. In addition to that, tens of thousands of Mainers have voluntarily added to the fund by using the tax form check-off and making Qualifying Contributions to help the candidates they support. Please don't be cavalier in cutting these funds. Don't trivialize what we the people have built.

More than a decade after its passage, the Clean Election system is strongly supported by Maine people – more strongly than ever, according to some polls. Maine people, like people all over the country, strongly oppose the flood of corporate money in our elections unleashed by the *Citizens United* decision and other court rulings. People everywhere want what we have – a campaign finance system that puts people ahead of corporations and other wealthy donors; one that gives voice to ordinary citizens.

Our Clean Election system is not the whole answer, but it is part of the solution to the growing problems of big money dominance of our political system.

Maine people do not want their government in retreat; they want their government to lead, to stand up and fight back against the self-serving influence of big money. They want their government to push forward with reform, not roll it back.

It's not too late. We urge you to stand up for Maine people by respecting and upholding our Clean Election law. Please reject these cuts to the Fund that citizens created and built.

Thank you.