

## **Maine Broadband Coalition**

### **Testimony in Support of LD 1336: An Act to Increase Transparency in Municipal Ballot Referenda Expenditures**

**April 21, 2023**

Senator Nangle, Representative Stover, and members of the Committee on State and Local Government, my name is Joe Oliva, and I offer this testimony on behalf of the Maine Broadband Coalition (MBC) in support of LD 1336: An Act to Increase Transparency in Municipal Ballot Referenda Expenditures.

The Maine Broadband Coalition seeks to represent a wide range of perspectives in Maine's broadband landscape but is fundamentally concerned with giving a voice to internet users across the state to secure universal, affordable, and equitable access to broadband connectivity that serves both current and future needs.

As an extension of that goal, we believe that all options should be available to communities when it comes to tackling such a significant challenge. Community-led broadband projects can be critical to achieving the state's goal of ubiquitous and equitable broadband access when private providers can't or won't make a business case to serve rural areas. There have been several successful community projects to date in Maine and a crucial element to the success of these projects is accurate information to citizens as they make their own broadband decisions. This bill will end anonymous campaigns against such local initiatives as small town residents prepare to vote on proposals.

As one example, the town of Readfield embarked upon a community broadband initiative, and [between June 3rd to June 14th, 2022](#), its residents were bombarded by approximately \$13,777 worth of Meta advertisements from a national group called the Alliance for Quality Broadband (AQB). Since this information required extensive research, we were able to see what was spent on digital advertisements, but we had to estimate the value of several full page print advertisements in newspapers. MBC was able to connect with peers across the country to learn more about AQB, but this cannot be expected of small towns across Maine, nor should it be. This group campaigned against the community-led fiber project that the town was set to vote on at their annual town meeting on June 14th, 2022. There are still unanswered questions about the financial backers of AQB because they weren't required to file election spending information with the small town of Readfield or the state. Ultimately, Readfield's broadband project was not approved and we can only guess the impact of the misinformation shared in this way.

We believe that every community has the right to decide what works best for them, even if it means voting down a project. What alarms us about this story is that an outside force with [inscrutable funding sources](#) was allowed to spend almost \$14,000 in online advertisements over the course of eleven days without anyone knowing

who they were or where their funding came from. We'll never know what was spent on print advertising, but we can guess it was in the thousands.

Closing this reporting loophole would not and should not stop groups like the Alliance for Quality Broadband from advocating as they see fit. It would, however, allow community members to discern who the messaging is coming from and in whose interest the organization is advocating.

At MBC, an element of our "all tools available" approach includes open and equal access to information. We believe that the presence of dark money is antithetical to the type of informed decision-making in which all stakeholders deserve to participate when it comes to investing in the broadband future of their communities.

On behalf of the Maine broadband Coalition and all the Mainers for which we advocate, I ask that you all vote "ought to pass" on LD 1336.