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JOINT STANDING COMMITTEE ON STATE AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Testimony of Shenna Bellows, Secretary of State
Department of the Secretary of State
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Testifying in favor

L.D. 577 “An Act to Increase Availability of Election Information on Local Government Websites”

Senator Nangle, Representative Stover and Members of the Joint Standing Committee on State and Local Government, my name is Shenna Bellows and I am the Secretary of State and the State’s chief elections officer. I am speaking today in support of L.D. 577.

Ensuring Mainers have the information they need to participate in our elections is one of the main goals of the Department of the Secretary of State. That includes critical information such as: how to register to vote, what proof of residency and identification documents are needed to register to vote, how to access a ballot, how to properly fill out a ballot, where your polling place is, how to find out who is on your ballot, how to cast your ballot if you’re stationed outside of Maine or living overseas, what your voting rights are as a student or someone residing in a correctional facility, how you can get involved as a poll worker, how to file paperwork to run for office, how to initiate a citizen initiative or people’s veto, the list goes on and on. Our current website is an extensive repository of state election information available to Maine voters. Our voter lookup tool, created in collaboration with Informe, is an easy way for voters to find their polling place, their elected officials and information about their clerk and registrar.

Expanding our website to include information about local elections for Maine’s 500 municipalities would be a significant undertaking. We know that there are about 176 municipalities who do not even have a website. The timing and nature of local elections depend on the municipality. Some municipalities use the town meeting format. Others may have multiple local races at times that different from state and federal elections. Depending upon the municipality’s organization, they could have a city council, select board or board of assessors. Thus, we believe this is a worthwhile goal over the long term, and we think that the Division of Elections is the best entity to work collaboratively with municipalities to make it possible for voters to have what’s most convenient to them – a one-stop shop for accurate, up-to-date information about their state and local elections. We are willing to take on this challenge afforded sufficient resources and time to make it happen.

We worked with election advocates to propose a friendly amendment to provide the resources required to undertake this effort and to clarify the language. We have proposed three staffers for this effort: a website manager and two digital navigators. The addition of a Website Manager would be necessary to keep information up to date across all our pages, including the local election information. With local

elections happening at various times throughout the year and in a variety of formats, keeping in touch with all of Maine's 500 municipal clerks to ensure we have the right information posted as quickly as possible is not something our current staff would have capacity to do. Accuracy of the information is vitally important for voter confidence in elections. Additionally, two Digital Navigators would also be necessary to work with the more than 100 municipalities who do not have their own websites create and maintain one. The Digital Navigators will also work on accessibility and updates for those municipalities with existing websites, and assisting municipalities which currently are not using the more secure .gov domain to switch over to it. Given the scope of that important work, these three new positions would be critical to carry out the new responsibilities this bill would require of our elections division.

The Department and specifically the Elections Division are already working on some technological upgrades that would assist in this work: we have set aside funds to hire a contractor to oversee a website conversion for our Department's web pages. This is a long-overdue project to make sure our websites are up to modern standards for accessibility and ease of access for Mainers conducting everyday transactions or seeking answers to their questions. Simultaneously, the leadership in the Elections Division, along with a contracted developer, are building out and implementing a new Central Voter Registration (CVR) system. This new CVR will provide us with new functionality and increased security. We are hoping to develop the system such that data that is maintained in the CVR can be extracted directly into an online voter information lookup portal. We have a strict implementation schedule in place for this new CVR, and while adding a local elections lookup function would be possible, it will take time and cannot supersede the functionality that is required for the new system for 2024. We suggest development of this phase of the CVR and accompanying online portal take place in 2025 with an implementation date of January 2026.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify, and I am happy to answer any questions you may have.