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Testimony of Rep. Ann Matlack introducing

LD 1336, An Act to Increase Transparency in Municipal Ballot Referenda Expenditures

Before the State and Local Government Committee

Good morning, Senator Nangle, Representative Stover, and members of the Joint Standing Committee on State and Local Government. My name is Ann Matlack, and I represent House District 43, which includes the communities of Cushing, Thomaston, South Thomaston, St George and part of Owls Head. I am pleased to present **LD 1336, An Act to Increase Transparency in Municipal Ballot Referenda Expenditures**.

LD 1336 is a straightforward bill that addresses a gap in Maine's campaign finance laws. Its aim is to bring the same campaign finance transparency that exists for state ballot questions to those in smaller local jurisdictions. It accomplishes this by requiring that ballot question spending over \$5,000 in all Maine communities be subject to reporting laws. Today, reporting laws for local ballot questions only apply to municipalities with a population of 15,000 or more.

Transparency in campaign finance serves an important public interest. Put simply, voters have a right to know who is speaking to them in a campaign. Is it neighbors coming together to express support or opposition? Is it an individual or a corporation with a vested interest in the outcome of the vote? Required disclosures reveal who is behind campaign spending, how much is being raised and spent, and how the money is spent. It helps communities understand who stands to gain or lose.

The principle is the same whether the issue is on the state or local ballot: voters need accurate information in order to make well-informed choices. In small towns, a little spending can go a long way, and often spending is one-sided. It is critical that timely information be made available during campaigns so that communities can fully understand what is at stake when deciding on a ballot question. In recent years, there has been campaign spending in small town elections on issues ranging from mining to municipal broadband that have gone undisclosed because there is no legal requirement for these expenditures to be reported.

LD 1336 would require anyone raising or spending \$5,000 in a local ballot question campaign in a town under 15,000 to report these expenditures using the system of electronic filing developed by the state's Ethics Commission. This is reflected in the amendment shared with this committee. This would ensure transparency without creating unnecessary burdens on smaller municipalities.

As Maine towns face questions about their future — whether it is about the best way to provide broadband internet access, setting building and development standards, or the role of cruise ships in the local economy — private citizens need all the information they can get. LD 1336 would ensure that people in all communities, regardless of population, benefit from timely and accessible campaign finance information.

Supreme Court Justice Louis Brandeis said famously, “The most important political office is that of private citizen.” Every one of us in elected office understands that it is the private citizens — the voters — who make it possible for us to serve. Democracy relies on citizens to do their job, and we must do what we can to make sure they have the tools they need to fully exercise their franchise.

Secondly, Justice Brandeis wrote and spoke wisely about the importance of transparent data, open meetings, and the role of the press in a free society, concluding that, “Sunlight is said to be the best of disinfectants.” It’s time we shine some light on this small but important corner of Maine ballot campaigns. I hope you will vote Ought to Pass on LD 1336.

Thank you for your consideration. I am happy to answer any questions you may have.