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Testimony of Representative Ed Crockett supporting

LD 1356, “An Act to Improve the Local Referendum Process by Increasing the Percentage of the Population Required to Submit a Local Referendum Question.”

Before the Joint Standing Committee on State and Local Government

Senator Nangle, Representative Stover and esteemed colleagues of the State and Local Government Committee. I’m Representative Ed Crockett from District 112 serving part of Portland and part of Falmouth. I visit you today in support of *LD 1356 An Act to Improve the Local Referendum Process by Increasing the Percentage of the Population Required to Submit a Local Referendum Question.*

I’ve been a resident of Portland for all but five years of my life. I’ll be 62 years old this summer. Last November we experienced something never seen before, and hopefully won’t happen again. Voters in Portland went to the polls, having to give themselves some extra time, due to 13 referendum questions being on the ballot. Thankfully, due to critical local, state and national races being contested we had a 70%+ voter turnout.

Eight of the questions were somewhat anticipated since they came from the Charter Commission that was elected the year before to consider major changes within the city. Six of these were approved, all as expected handily, but the two most sweeping proposals (an executive mayor and school board budget authority) were soundly defeated.

The other five referendum questions came from voter-initiated ballot referendum campaigns with policy proposals driven by special interest groups. Only one of those passed. With over 70% voter turnout, the voice of all the voters was heard. Nobody could cry foul.

So, here’s the crazy thing. The charter commission vote in the summer of 2021 drew less than 15% of voters and created a very unbalanced commission driven by the same special interest groups that only had to gather about 1,500 signatures in a community of nearly 65,000 to get on the ballot. That is not a high bar. In fact, it was a lay-up.

Portland was lucky. Imagine if these questions had appeared during an off-cycle year when voter turnout is always down. If that had been the case every one of those referendum questions would have likely passed.

Unfortunately, the system as stands can be gamed. Raising the threshold on signatures is a way to strengthen our democracy and bring integrity back into the process. I think Rep. Graham's proposal to raise the bar is a must. I haven't done the math but worry if 15% is enough. I'm thinking 25% enhances the likelihood that the proposal has more than special interest advocacy.

In closing, I encourage you to pass LD 1356. Thank you and I would be more than happy to answer your questions.