



TO: The Honorable Tim Nangle
The Honorable Holly Stover, Co-Chairs
Members of the Joint Standing Committee on State and Local Government

DATE: April 25, 2023

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

Good afternoon Senator Nangle and Representative Stover,

My name is Lane Sturtevant. I'm a resident of Warren. I am here today representing the League of Women Voters of Maine. The League is testifying in opposition to LD 1356, An Act to Improve the Local Referendum Process by Increasing the Percentage of the Population Required to Submit a Local Referendum Question.

The League of Women Voters of Maine is a nonpartisan political organization that has been working for over 100 years to encourage informed and active participation in government, to increase understanding of major public policy issues, and to influence public policy through education and advocacy. We never support or oppose any political party or candidate.

The League of Women Voters of Maine believes that citizen-initiated referenda are an important form of direct democracy, one that allows community members to utilize their collective power in the event of an unresponsive or obstructionist representative government. The people are the ultimate authority in a democracy, after all.

It is vital that the local referendum process remain accessible to ordinary citizens in all communities. The State Legislature itself endorsed the importance of the local citizen-initiated referendum process when it preempted municipalities from prohibiting local initiatives in Title 30-A, §2504.

The League of Women Voters of Maine is concerned that increasing the number of signatures required for citizen initiatives in non-charter municipalities would make this invaluable tool of direct democracy less accessible to ordinary citizens. Municipalities with charters can choose to increase their signature requirements through a charter amendment, as Portland¹ is indeed considering. That is their home rule prerogative, and there is a democratic process for such charter amendments.

Municipalities without charters, on the other hand, rely on the threshold in Title 30-A, §2528, sub-§5. Non-charter municipalities are by and large much more rural than municipalities with charters in Maine; this rural character can impose a higher logistical burden on the process of citizen initiatives, as these

¹ "Council to consider changes to Portland referendum process," Portland Press Herald, March 27, 2023.

communities tend to have less public infrastructure, fewer public or community spaces, and often less extensive civic networks.

This bill feels like a reaction to a recent spate of contentious citizen-initiated local referenda in certain municipalities. However, this bill does not actually address the issue in those municipalities, which have charters and can therefore set their own local referendum signature requirements. We have to ask: are residents of non-charter municipalities themselves requesting a higher signature requirement?

Thank you for the opportunity to testify. I would be happy to answer any questions from the Committee.