

Appropriations and Financial Affairs Committee

Testimony in support of LD 646

Kerry Leichtman

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My name is Kerry Leichtman. I am the assessor for the towns of Camden and Rockport. Thank you chairpersons Rotundo and Sachs, and honorable members of the Appropriations and Financial Affairs Committee. I appreciate having the opportunity to address you this afternoon.

Over the years, I have come before Legislative committees many times – mostly the Taxation Committee – sometimes in support of legislation, sometimes in opposition. Whether for or against, my intention has always been to assist lawmakers in making good law by providing the perspective of someone who works with tax law and taxpayers every day. That perspective is never partisan. I am independent – fiercely so. I'm not a fan of what I see as the stranglehold the two parties have on government.

LD290 was written and pushed through by three members of one party; it passed through the senate and house with support by members of both parties. It received an Ought Not To Pass majority vote by the Taxation Committee during the first session in 2021 but passed in the full Legislature in the closing hours of the second session in 2022. There was no roll call vote, not even a show of hands vote, just a banging of the gavel and on to its next stop here, in Appropriations, where, I believe had a factual fiscal note been attached, it most likely would not have seen the light of day because of how expensive it was. That's what we're here discussing today – appropriating the rest of what the bill actually cost in its first year of implementation.

You, and by you I mean the entire Legislature, not just this committee, have spent the money, now the bill needs to be paid. I urge you to pass LD 646 and thank you Chairwoman Sachs for sponsoring it.

I've testified at Taxation about the upheaval LD290 caused in municipal government, particularly in assessors' and tax collectors' offices across the state, and about the Legislature's failure to reimburse us for the costs of implementing the program despite the Constitutional promise at Article 9 section 21 that we be reimbursed for 90% of the cost to implement. Some members were sympathetic to statements of the havoc and expense caused by LD290, others expressed the desire that we assessors suck it up and stop whining.

What has not been discussed is where the real damage has been done. Seniors on fixed and limited incomes thought they were finally going to see property tax relief. I have remarked before that we could learn a lesson about effective mass communications if we study how the state's senior population, many of whom do not use social media, or even

computers, found out so quickly about LD290. In many instances they were coming to assessing offices looking for applications before the assessor knew what they were talking about.

So much of LD290 was impractical and wrong. That the wealthy were just as entitled to a property tax freeze as the elderly living on social security proved the cynicism with which the bill was conceived. There was no way this state could afford the program. Shame on anyone who would say otherwise.

Those seniors now have nothing, and I have not heard of a task force or working group assembled to try and come up with a way to get real relief to them. Because had one been formed I would have been first in line to serve on it.

I have had the privilege to serve on many legislative task forces and working groups – most of them formed at a Legislative committee's request to figure out how to solve a problem or how to implement newly-passed legislation. No such group was formed to figure out LD290 when it was passed and no group has been formed to figure out how to replace it – or to look at the bigger picture of how to reform our taxation system.

I speak with taxpayers every day. Our system no longer works. Assessors are under a Constitutional mandate to assess at market value – and the market has gone nuts. I can and do explain this when people come to my office, and even when I successfully describe how it all works, the understanding doesn't make it any easier for people, to pay their tax bill. And this goes beyond seniors, working families are also struggling to stay in their homes.

I have also told my taxpayers of my intent to study what other states have done. My plan was to spend time this winter conducting research, but the ironic twist to that is I've been so busy meeting with taxpayers, talking them off the ledge, that I haven't had enough time to do meaningful research. The little I have been able to do though has given me optimism - there are ideas out there. We need to gather and study them, and then get constructively creative to make something that works.

Thank you for indulging me this afternoon.