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**JOINT STANDING COMMITTEE ON VETERANS AND LEGAL AFFAIRS**

Testimony of Shenna Bellows, Secretary of State  
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Testifying in opposition to

L.D. 1527 "An Act to Require Postage Prepaid Envelopes Be Provided for the Return of Absentee Ballots"

Senator Hickman, Representative Supica and Members of the Joint Standing Committee on Veterans and Legal Affairs, my name is Shenna Bellows, I live in Manchester, and I am the Secretary of State. I am testifying in opposition to L.D. 1527.

Please know that I do still support the concept of prepaid postage for absentee ballot return envelopes. At this time, however, there are two reasons why I do not believe this committee should advance this particular bill at this time.

First, L.D. 1527 would be a competing measure to the citizen initiative that is now L.D. 1149. One part of Section 20 of L.D. 1149 reads "A public office, or public official or employee who is acting in an official capacity, may not prepay the return postage for an absentee ballot." This language would clearly conflict with the language in L.D. 1527, which would require the Secretary of State to design and supply municipalities with postage prepaid absentee ballot return envelopes. This means that if L.D. 1527 were enacted, it would not go to the Governor as other bills do. It would go to the November ballot as an alternate "yes" option to L.D. 1149, as well as a "no" option. This would not be a ranked-choice election. Voters would only be able to choose one of those three options.

Second, the costs – both in terms of staff time and appropriated funds – to implement this policy are considerable. The Elections staff is at capacity both in terms of staff and is under-resourced already in terms of budget. We cannot take on new sizeable initiatives without significantly adding staffing and funding to the Division.

To understand the costs, it's important to understand how elections are administered; our current system for designing, printing, and testing every ballot and envelope is centralized with our office. The state's Elections Division regularly has a large batch of envelopes printed following a competitive bid process. These envelopes have a single, uniform layout that may be used by any municipality. This makes proofreading very easy and keeps the cost of printing down. Once the envelopes are received

from the printer, staff sort them into the number that each municipality will likely need. The sorting occurs after surveying the municipalities about what they already have on hand, and then we carefully distribute throughout the state. The range each municipality needs varies from just a handful to over 20,000. Throughout the election season, our office provides additional envelopes as needed. For example, if more voters in a specific municipality are requesting absentee ballots than anticipated, then we would send that municipality additional envelopes adequate to meet the increased need.

Currently, we can use the same envelope design for each municipality because when a municipality sends out their absentee ballots, they sticker or write the return address to their municipal office on the return envelopes. Leftover envelopes are stored in the Elections Division for use in future elections, unless the requirements for what has been printed on the envelope change for that future election.

Should this bill become law, our elections staff would need to work with the United States Postal Service (USPS) to set up a new state account with a subaccount for each municipality and design and proof individual envelope designs for each municipality (containing their unique postal permit number) around the state. This could mean approximately \$800 annually per permit. That does not account for postage costs themselves, which could be as small as 62 cents for larger jurisdictions like Portland if there were no other municipal ballots included in the return envelope and \$1.63 per envelope for the smaller jurisdictions if there were no other municipal ballots included in the return envelope. We strongly encourage municipalities to hold municipal elections at the same time as statewide elections, so that would increase the postage costs considerably.

In addition to postage, we would need to find a printing company that would want to take on this new print job. Given that the printer would need to make up various amounts of 500 different envelope designs, the cost and effort to do such a job would be much higher than what we are paying for envelope printing now. We also would need to print a much higher quantity than in the past to ensure that no municipality ran out of their customized envelopes.

To prepare testimony for L.D. 26 in the 131<sup>st</sup> Legislature, we requested and received a budgetary estimate from Snowman Printing in Bangor for printing 1.5 million envelopes (our assessed need for the 2024 elections). The budgetary estimate for printing that quantity of the generic, single design envelopes was 3.7 cents an envelope for a cost of \$56,012. The additional cost for imprinting varying quantities of the envelopes with the specific return address and postal permit information for each municipality was estimated at 4 cents per envelope, for a cost of \$60,020, making the total cost of the print job \$116,032. To compare, for the then-last 3 November elections we printed 1.085 million of the single layout envelopes with an average per envelope cost of 3.8 cents and a total cost of \$41,886. Even adjusting the prior cost for the additional 415,000 envelopes to be printed in a single style brings the total cost to \$57,656 less than half the cost of the customized envelopes to be required by this bill. The United State Postal Service also informed us that the design for each of the 500+ different mail envelopes would have to be approved individually with 10 test envelopes printed for each prior to final printing.

Proofing would involve reviewing each envelope design and the number ordered, which would need to account for extras of each design. Once printed, staff would need to package for shipping and store the additional envelopes carefully so that additional ones could be sent out quickly. As our storage area in Elections is at capacity, we would likely need to acquire more storage space. We have heard from clerks loud and clear on the BMV side over the last few years that they are running out of storage room

for license plates, so we would not want to ask them to also have to store too many extra absentee ballot return envelopes.

And finally, all of this additional logistical work would require additional staffing in the Elections Division.

For the above reasons, we oppose L.D. 1527 at this time. Thank you and I would be happy to answer any questions that the committee may have.