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Testimony of Rep. Lori K. Gramlich presenting

LD 1787, An Act to Strengthen the Maine Clean Election Act

Before the Joint Standing Committee on Veterans and Legal Affairs

Senator Hickman, Representative Supica and esteemed members of the Veterans and Legal Affairs Committee, I am Lori Gramlich. I have the honor and privilege of representing House District 131, the lovely seaside community of Old Orchard Beach, and of serving as Assistant House Majority Leader. Thank you for the opportunity to return to my former committee today to present ***LD 1787, An Act to Strengthen the Maine Clean Election Act***.

I have been fighting for clean elections since the 1990s — as an advocate, a citizen and now as a legislator. I have also proudly run as a Clean Elections candidate. I know firsthand how essential this program is to our democracy — and how critical it is that we continue to strengthen it for the future.

LD 1787 proposes much-needed adjustments to ensure the Clean Elections program remains effective, accessible and sustainable. First and foremost, it increases the statutory annual funding for the Clean Election Fund from \$3 million to \$3.5 million. This modest increase is vital. As the Maine Ethics Commission noted in its January 2024 report, the fund will face strain in 2026 unless additional steps are taken — whether through drawing down future appropriations, making one-time infusions or revising the baseline funding.

This bill proposes a permanent fix — a change to the statutory funding that will support the rising costs of legislative races and help prepare for the planned expansion of Clean Elections to county offices. A stable, predictable funding model reduces the need for stopgap measures and ensures long-term viability.

We also know that the Clean Elections program remains popular — not just with candidates from both major parties but with voters across Maine. Mainers continue to demand meaningful action to reduce the influence of big money in politics. In 2025, we have the opportunity to meet that demand by strengthening the program and expanding it.

That expansion includes a critical piece of our democratic infrastructure: county government. County governments oversee jails, emergency management, registry of deeds, and vital aspects of public safety and public health. During the pandemic, we saw counties distribute ARPA funds to address community needs — from dispatch services to shelters. These are essential services, and the people who oversee them should be able to run for office without potentially being beholden or perceived as beholden to private interests. Including county offices in the Clean Elections program is a logical and necessary next step.

LD 1787 also proposes raising the seed money contribution limit for gubernatorial Clean Elections candidates from \$100 to \$500 per individual donor — while maintaining the overall cap of \$200,000. This change has no fiscal impact, but it would make it significantly more feasible for candidates to raise the funds they need during the early stages of their campaigns. Past gubernatorial candidates have consistently reported that the \$100 cap made it unnecessarily difficult to remain competitive, and we must address that barrier if we want to keep the program viable at the executive level.

In short, LD 1787 is a smart, forward-looking bill. It protects the integrity of a program that has helped make Maine a national model for clean, citizen-funded elections. It helps prepare us for the 2026 election cycle and beyond. And it responds to real feedback from candidates and the public alike.

I urge the committee to give this bill your full support. Thank you for your time and for your continued commitment to clean, fair and transparent elections in Maine.