



# HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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May 5, 2025

## TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF:

### **LD 1635 “An Act to Streamline Municipal Referenda Recount Initiation”**

#### **THE JOINT STANDING COMMITTEE ON STATE AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT**

Senator Baldacci, Representative Salisbury, and members of the Committee on State and Local Government, my name is Amy Arata and I represent House district 104, which includes New Gloucester and part of Gray. It is my pleasure to present LD 1635, An Act to Streamline Municipal Referenda Recount Initiation.

I have noticed, and perhaps you have as well, that the tone of civic engagement has become rife with hostility and acrimony. This legislation will bring some much-needed relief to a source of strife and mistrust at the local level. As a former school board member and town budget committee chairman, as well as a legislator, I understand how hard these volunteers work and how discouraging it is when that work is attacked.

The need for this legislation became apparent to me last year when the school budget referendum in my district, MSAD 15, passed by only 11 votes on June 11. This upset some members of the community who questioned the validity of the results, and they had to go through the process of collecting at least 100 registered voters' signatures for a recount. Gathering signatures, especially in a rural area, is a lot of work. The recount did not occur until July 15, with over a month of uncertainty for the school district and simmering animosity in the community. There was hostility on both sides of the issue, both in town and especially on social media. Although I had no part in the recount petition drive, I was present as a community leader and experienced nastiness directed at me. These types of encounters make it difficult for civic leaders to work together on the common goal of serving our community.

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Regardless of one's hoped-for outcome, most can agree that there is value in certainty that an election result is accurate. LD 1635 would require an automatic recount if a municipal referendum passes or fails by less than 1% of all votes cast. Although in my district the school budget passed by a small margin, this bill would also be beneficial for school boards with budgets that fail by a small margin. Before school boards go through the difficult, and sometimes divisive, work of making budget cuts, they should be sure that the election result was accurate.

School budgets have not been passing by wide margins in Maine recently. As I invited legislators to co-sponsor this bill, I sought out representatives of communities that have had close budget votes. They include towns in Oxford County, Lewiston, Gorham, Westbrook, and Poland. Note that this is a bipartisan issue. We all want our constituents to be assured that election results are accurate, and the increased civility that accompanies this certainty.

I believe that 1% is a close enough margin to warrant a recount. My primary concern is with school budget referenda, but this legislation is in the section of statute that refers to all referenda. If the committee feels that passing this legislation will result in too many recounts and be a burden on municipal officials rather than the intended respite, perhaps reducing this threshold to 0.5% of votes cast would alleviate this concern.

Regardless of the details of how the committee chooses to proceed with this legislation, please consider how much this will contribute to progress toward more trust and civility in local politics. Thank you for your attention and I'm happy to answer questions.

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Amy B. Arata". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Amy B. Arata  
State Representative