

Tyler Backus  
OAKLAND  
LD 1748

Senator Rafferty, Representative Brennan and distinguished members of the Joint Standing: My name is Tyler Backus and I am a resident of Oakland, Maine. I write to you today in opposition to LD 1748 An Act to Reform the School Budget Referendum Process by Limiting the Circumstances in Which Referenda Occur.

My opposition to LD 1748 lies in that the referendum not occur in most cases unless a group of citizens can go around and collect 20% of the number of voters who voted in the last gubernatorial election. This is an extremely high bar to reach; in our larger districts and especially in our geographically large districts this is not an achievable threshold. School districts should be looking for greater participation, and this bill would provide for less participation.

I actually think all school districts, along with other public entities, should be required to hold the referendum on the budget as it allows a whole day for voting, in your own town, instead of a set evening that occurs only in one community, which allows for greater public participation.

Municipalities have challenges themselves getting participation at their town meetings to vote on budgets, even though they have no referendum. To think that removing a part of the budget process will encourage greater participation is foolhardy. I actually have not been able to attend budget during my time on the department's School Finance Team because I attended the Tri-State Maine Association Business Official meeting, which occurs at the same time over a 3 day period. Only every third year does it occur in Maine, and it always occurs in Portland. Therefore, because I have been heavily involved in the financing of Maine schools I have not been able to attend the budget meeting for my own district. I also know that many other districts have held their budget meetings on the same date, thus making it impossible for school business managers to attend the budget meeting in the district where they live.

The referendum also allows for the budget to be voted down if a budget is voted in error, or in protest at the budget meeting, as happened a number of times over the years. A number of times over the years, and specifically in RSU 58 a few years ago, a specific budget category was voted to only \$1 at the public hearing. Without the referendum step, that is how the budget would have passed. There are other examples of this occurring, including an error in the budget for my own district, that only was able to be fixed because of the referendum step where the budget could be voted down.

The legislature should look for ways to strengthen involvement of the community in our schools and other local governments, whether that is through special programming or how government functions. Though I have never participated, my own town Oakland, has a separate elected budget committee that works with the municipal departments to develop a budget that is proposed to the town council. If the legislature was looking at ways to strengthen public participation, this may be one way to develop that participation.

However, as the bill is currently written, the legislature should not support the current bill.