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TO: The Honorable Craig Hickman
The Honorable Laura Supica
Members of the Joint Standing Committee on Veterans and Legal Affairs

DATE: April 30th, 2025

RE: LD 1787: An Act to Strengthen the Maine Clean Election Act

I appreciate the opportunity to submit testimony in strong support of LD 1787.

Back in 1995, I was one of the 1,100 volunteers who collected signatures to put Clean Elections on the ballot. Alongside many friends and colleagues, I worked for passage of the referendum. After we won, and Clean Elections became law, I had many opportunities to share the inspiring story of how and why Maine citizens created the first full public funding system for state offices in the country.

For three decades I have talked with and listened to people in Maine and all over the United States who care passionately about democracy. People who, even though they fully understand why so many are disillusioned about politics, refuse to give in to cynicism. People who recognize the profound problems of money in politics and are hungry for solutions. People who are committed to doing their part to make democracy work.

In hundreds of conversations about money in politics over many years, no one has ever suggested that campaign finance laws be weakened. And in hundreds of conversations about Clean Elections, the most frequently asked question is, “Why can’t we make everyone use it?” The simple answer is that, thanks to several Supreme Court rulings, because Clean Election candidates must limit their spending, the program must be voluntary. We want to keep this voluntary program strong so that it is a practical, workable, and attractive program for candidates.

This bill offers a Clean Election option to many more candidates, bringing all the benefits of the program to county offices. Future candidates for Sheriff, District Attorney, and County Commissioner will be able to engage voters in the same ways as participating legislative and gubernatorial candidates do, stimulating conversations about the work of county officials at kitchen tables and front porches as candidates go through the qualifying process and campaign. Voters will have a bigger stake in these races, which are often sleepers. Think about it — unless some event (often tragic) splashes the Sheriff’s department or the District Attorney across our news feeds, most of us are not thinking too often or too deeply about county government. But,

as we are reminded in those high-profile moments, the work is critical and impactful, and it touches our communities and our lives in very consequential ways.

This would be the first expansion of Clean Elections since the program went into effect 25 years ago, and the opportunities and benefits are exciting to contemplate.

Much of the work by Clean Election advocates over the last quarter century has been to make sure the program is working as intended, and that has required tweaks along the way. This bill includes two important changes that will ensure the viability of Clean Elections.

LD 1787 calls for raising the Seed Money limit for gubernatorial candidates to \$500. This is an important viability measure because it allows for a more robust, early start for a statewide campaign. Seed money is not required, but it is the only money that participating candidates are allowed to raise and spend before qualifying for Clean Election distributions. Candidates who voluntarily limit their spending must have confidence that the limit will allow for a vigorous campaign, and this provision will help. And it does so without raising the cost of the program.

Finally, it is very important that the legislature fund Clean Elections at levels that allow the program to succeed. This bill calls for a relatively modest increase in the annual transfer to the Clean Election Fund in order to cover anticipated future costs.

The Clean Election Fund “is a special, dedicated, nonlapsing fund and any interest generated by the fund is credited to the fund.” The funding mechanism receives an annual transfer so that it can build over time in order to pay for distributions in the 2-year legislative cycle and the 4-year gubernatorial cycle. The idea was to build the fund incrementally, (just as we build our savings accounts), so that the state would not have to come up with very large sums all at once, and all of this was spelled out in the original citizen initiative that created the law. As many legislators are aware, over the years successive governors and legislators tapped the Fund’s balance to cover unrelated state expenses, and those funds have only been partially restored. In some election years, additional transfers were made to the Fund, but there is still more than \$6.6 million of statutory funding outstanding. It was used for other purposes and never put back.

The \$500,000 annual increase in statutory funding called for in LD 1787 is necessary, important, and should be a priority.

I appreciate Representative Gramlich and her co-cosponsors for bringing this bill forward. Please keep Clean Elections strong by voting Ought to Pass.

Thank you for your consideration.