CGA Government Administration and Elections Committee

March 7, 2011 Public Hearing

Testimony Submitted by Christine S. Horrigan, Vice President of Public Issues

Opposition to:

SB 1009 AA CREATING THE OFFICE OF GOVERNMENT ACCOUNTABILITY

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The League of Women Voters of Connecticut appreciates the opportunity to comment today on the Governor's plan to merge five watchdog agencies—the State Elections Enforcement Commission, Freedom of Information Commission, the Judicial Review Council, the Contracting Standards Board, and the Office of State Ethics—into one entity, the Office of Government Accountability. ***The League strongly opposes this plan as proposed in SB 1009.***

The League believes that the public should have confidence in the integrity of its government. To accomplish this end, we support measures to ensure the existence of ***strong, effective, independent watchdog agencies*** such as the current Office of State Ethics, the Freedom of Information and the State Elections Enforcement Commission. In addition, we support the allocation of resources necessary for these commissions to fulfill their responsibilities.

Independence is critical to strong, effective watchdog agencies. In order to garner the public's confidence, watchdog agencies must be protected from political pressure, free from conflicts of interest and immune to outside influences. The Governor's plan, as outlined in SB 1009, would compromise the independence of Connecticut's watchdog agencies in several ways:

- Under current law, citizen commissions select the executive director of each agency to ensure that the agency is independent from those they regulate. Under the Governor's proposal, the executive director of the Office of Government Accountability would be ***appointed by the Governor and answerable to the Governor, thereby compromising the independence of the Office with respect to transgressions by the executive branch.***

- Many of the five agencies targeted for consolidation exercise some sort of jurisdiction over one another. For example, the Office of State Ethics is overseen by the Freedom of Information Commission and vice versa. ***Consolidating these agencies and their legal staffs into one entity will create internal conflicts of interest as well problems of public***

perception. Creating firewalls is not enough to overcome these problems. Moreover, a superagency, made up of 5 agencies with differing and competing jurisdictions and needs, would not be able to effectively and fairly oversee itself. It is not difficult to imagine scenarios where the superagency would find itself in the roles of both defendant and judge.

- With the exception of the Contracting Standards board which has a mission similar to the Office of State Ethics and exists primarily on paper, each of the agencies targeted for consolidation has a mission which is unique. These unique and potentially conflicting missions make them incompatible for consolidation.

- The Governor has proposed repealing General Statute §1-81a (see Section 17 of SB 1000 *AA Reforming the State Budget Process*). This statute, passed during the Rowland era, prohibits the Governor from reducing the annual budgets of the Office of State Ethics, the State Elections Enforcement Commission and the Freedom of Information Commission without legislative approval and is designed to insulate these agencies from political pressure by a single individual. The elimination of this safeguard threatens the independence of these agencies, particularly when coupled with the appointment of an executive director who serves at the pleasure of the Governor.

The creation of an Office of Government Accountability controlled by the Governor would inevitably lead to an erosion of the public's confidence in the integrity of its government. We understand that in this difficult economic climate streamlining agencies across the board and meeting consolidation targets is appealing from a political perspective. The savings from the consolidation—$1 million from a combined budget for all five agencies of $10.3 million, 0.06 percent of the entire state budget for 2012—is miniscule; the potential damage to the trust Connecticut's citizens have in our government is enormous. ***We cannot allow false economy to compromise the important work that these independent agencies are doing for our democracy. Please VOTE NO on SB 1009.***

Thank you.