



STATE OF CONNECTICUT
STATE ELECTIONS ENFORCEMENT COMMISSION

***WRITTEN TESTIMONY PRESENTED TO THE APPROPRIATIONS COMMITTEE
IN OPPOSITION TO GOVERNOR'S HB NOS. 6353 & 6354***

March 22, 2013

*Statement of Stephen F. Cashman, Member
State Elections Enforcement Commission*

A little more than two years ago, I appeared before the General Assembly fighting for the independence of the State Elections Enforcement Commission. Now, here I am, back once more, testifying before the General Assembly, again fighting for the perseverance of the State Election Enforcement Commission. Once again I am offering testimony on why dismantling the watchdog agencies, particularly the SEEC, on which I have the honor of serving, is a bad idea. Why the watchdog agencies remain fundamental to our democracy, representing the public's interest in ensuring that government works for them and not for the wealthy, the connected, or, frankly, the elected few. Once again I feel compelled to explain to you how our Commission performs a vital service to Connecticut by administering the Citizens' Election Program and how that program, from which most of you received a grant to fund your campaigns, simply cannot work if you enact the plan that the governor has proposed to dismantle the SEEC, disseminate its parts to other agencies, and dismiss the unique budget protections it enjoys.

But none of this is new to you. You all have read the myriad newspaper articles about how important it is to have independent watchdog agencies to guard against unscrupulous or even criminal actors in government. Some of you were here in 2004 when the General Assembly placed the budgets of the ethics, FOI, and elections agencies outside the purview of the governor's caprice. Many of you voted in 2005 to create the Citizens' Election Program, which established a first-of-its-kind public campaign financing program. Most of you have enjoyed the liberation from reliance on lobbyist and PAC money that the CEP has afforded to participating candidates.

Nevertheless, here we are. In 2011, I told the Government Administration and Elections Committee, that I was proud of the work that the Commission does. I remain just as proud of our work now as I was then, and I still believe that significant changes to the way the Commission operates will only damage its vital work and harm the Citizens' Election Program.

Since 2011, the Commission has run the CEP for another General Assembly election to great success. Our staff pulled together after significant budget cuts that saw staff and funding reductions and, against all odds, made certain that every qualified candidate committee that applied for a grant received it, on time. We ensured that our electronic filing system remained available for treasurers who sometimes decide that 2 a.m. is a good time to update their filings. We worked hard to answer thousands of questions, guide novice treasurers – and candidates – and offer timely advice to you, our constituents. When we received complaints, we investigated allegations and disposed of

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cases in an evenhanded and consistent manner, no matter who had complained or who was the respondent, free from any taint of political influence.

One key to the smooth operation of our agency, however, was that it worked as a whole, a single entity in which all of its components were directed toward common goals, namely, ensuring that political campaigns in Connecticut are transparent, that elections are fair, and that there is a place where individuals can file complaints when they believe something has gone wrong with our democratic system. By design, each part of the Commission – elections officers, attorneys, investigators, accounts examiners, IT professionals, and administrative staff – plays a vital role in making sure that the Commission can administer and enforce Connecticut’s election laws effectively and efficiently. Carving off the Commission’s units and assigning them to work on other issues besides election law will not only create more inefficiencies, it will undermine the continued viability of the Citizens’ Election Program by jeopardizing the Commission’s ability to review applications, award grants, and ensure participants’ compliance with program regulations.

The State Elections Enforcement Commission and the Citizens’ Election Program were not born of rashness and impulse. Their current formulation represent decades of time and thought by lawmakers who worked to create a system that would afford to the citizens of Connecticut comfort that their government was not for sale, that the days of “Corrupticut” were gone for good. By removing its attorneys, the Commission will no longer be able to stand behind the Citizens’ Election Program and say that the money that the Commission gives to candidate committees is being spent properly. By taking away the Commission’s IT staff, the ongoing process of making more campaign finance statements immediately available to the public through our online database will be jeopardized and more expenditures will avoid the cleansing light of transparency.

The Commission’s administration of the Citizens’ Election Program requires dedicated staff working collaboratively. Breaking up these functions into separate agencies increases the odds that the Citizens’ Election Program will simply collapse as an unworkable dream and all the good it has done for Connecticut will disappear.

In closing, I urge you to reject Gov. Malloy’s plan to weaken the vital oversight roles that the SEEC and other watchdog agencies play in our democratic process. This plan lacks any answers to the numerous operational problems that will be presented under such a drastic consolidation, while simultaneously entrusting these vital functions to an untested, unqualified administrator answerable solely to the governor. Engaging in consolidation for consolidation’s sake absent any fiscal or operational benefits serves only to weaken SEEC’s ability to perform its unique and important function that keep our democracy and the democratic process healthy and responsive to the citizens that government serves.