TESTIMONY PRESENTED BEFORE THE GOVERNMENT ADMINISTRATION AND ELECTIONS COMMITTEE

March 25, 2019

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Office of State Ethics

Senate Bill 1095 - An Act Concerning Municipal Ethics

Senator Flexer, Representative Fox, Senator Sampson, Representative France and distinguished Committee members. Thank you for this opportunity to provide testimony on our agency proposal concerning municipal ethics.

This bill requires all municipalities to have a municipal code of ethics that has, at a minimum, basic ethics provisions that would apply to municipal officials and employees. The provisions in this bill stem from a year-long effort conducted by the Citizen’s Ethics Advisory Board’s Subcommittee on Municipal Ethics (“Subcommittee”).

During 2018, the Subcommittee held public meetings almost every month during which it discussed with various stakeholders their views concerning municipal ethics. The Subcommittee invited and heard from the Connecticut Conference of Municipalities, Connecticut Council of Small Towns, Connecticut Association of Municipal Attorneys, Common Cause Connecticut, Connecticut Citizen Action Group, and the Southeastern Connecticut Council of Governments, among others. In addition, each Subcommittee member directly engaged with the municipalities and local organizations in the region of the state in which they reside. Finally, the Subcommittee conducted a survey of all Connecticut municipalities regarding their treatment of municipal ethics matters.

According to the survey conducted by the Subcommittee, where 130 out of 169 municipalities responded, 28 municipalities do not have an ethics code. However, upon review of municipal records, the actual number is closer to 40 if you consider those 39 municipalities that did not responded to the Subcommittee’s survey.

Based on these discussions and the results of the survey, the Subcommittee determined that, at this time, the best approach concerning municipal ethics is to require all municipalities in Connecticut to have a Code of Ethics that, at a minimum, has certain basic ethics provisions. The proposed minimum ethics provisions contained in the Senate Bill No. 1095 are commonly used in any governmental ethics code. In fact, the results of the municipal ethics survey indicate that a large number of municipalities, both cities and towns, already have these basic provisions in their existing ethics codes. However, as the survey has shown, there is still a considerable segment of Connecticut municipalities that do not have an ethics code in place.
March 25, 2019
Office of State Ethics Testimony

In crafting this legislative proposal, the Subcommittee was particularly sensitive to fiscal concerns raised by some stakeholders. Therefore, municipalities have an option to draft their own minimum provisions, as described in the proposal, or adopt model minimum provisions to be published by the Office of State Ethics on its website. Further, this bill proposes that the Office of State Ethics offer ethics training on the minimum provisions beginning in 2021.

Residents of Connecticut towns and cities are entitled to have a local government whose officials and employees uphold highest ethical standards and who are provided with clear and basic guidelines to help them uphold such standards.

The Office of State Ethics and the Citizen’s Ethics Advisory Board encourage this Committee to support this bill.

Thank you for your consideration of our agency proposals, we look forward to working with the committee and I can answer any questions you may have.