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Committee Votes to Strengthen Ballot Initiative Process

AUGUSTA-The Maine Legislature's Legal and Veterans Affairs Committee today voted eight to five to support an amended version of a bill to strengthen laws regarding ballot initiatives.

LD 1730, An Act To Strengthen the Ballot Initiative Process, sponsored by Senator John Nutting, D-Androscoggin County, would require those businesses who receive compensation for circulating petitions to register with the Secretary of State's office.

Stressing the need for the legislation, Senator Nutting said that Maine has seen an increase in ballot fraud. He added, the Ballot Initiative Strategy Center recently gave Maine a "D" for its election integrity. Out-of-state companies and organizations are paying people to circulate petitions to get referendums to the ballot, and little background information is gathered about these people.

In recent elections, town clerks around the state are finding signatures that do not match. Senator Nutting and Representative Stacy Dostie, D- Sabattus, pointed to an example in their legislative districts. Greene Deputy Town Clerk Sally Hebert found the name of a man who died in 2004 on petitions turned in last year as part of a people's veto effort.

"As a result of the investigative work done by our Greene Town Clerk, a total of 29 signatures were found to be forged by an interest group in the last election on one petition," said Representative Stacy Dostie, the bill's lead co-sponsor. "This is unacceptable and jeopardizes the integrity of our elections."

"This legislation is an important step forward towards preventing fraud," said co-sponsor Rep. Seth Berry, D-Bowdoinham. "It adds another level of protection to our democratic process. So long as our petition drives are honest, none of us should fear a little sunshine and a more empowered Maine voter."

Senator Nutting also pointed out that if the bill does become a law, it will not affect those who voluntarily circulate petitions. "The purpose of this legislation is to restore integrity to the petition process by creating penalties against companies who are abusing the citizens initiative process-not discourage everyday Mainers from getting involved in the process."

LD 1730 now moves to the Senate and House of Representatives for additional votes. More information about the bill can be found online at

<http://www.mainelegislature.org/LawMakerWeb/summary.asp?ID=280035266>.