

CITY CLERK'S OFFICE

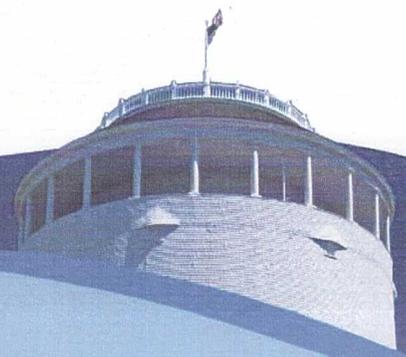
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**Testimony of Lisa Goodwin, Bangor City Clerk, Before the
Veterans and Legal Affairs Committee
Opposing LD 413 – An Act to Expand Access to Absentee Ballots
March 2, 2015**

**Senator Cyrway, Representative Luchini and Honorable Members of the Joint Standing
Committee on Veterans and Legal Affairs**

I am Lisa Goodwin, City Clerk for the City of Bangor. I have served in municipal government for 24 years and have worked in both a small community and a larger city, each having its own unique challenges during an election cycle. I am here to speak in opposition to LD 413 and to stress the necessity for keeping the 3-business day cut off for absentee voting. My opposition to LD 413 is simply to safeguard the integrity of the election process.

I support the testimony provided by the Maine Town & City Clerks Association and would like to add my own perspective on how this will impact the election process. I would ask you to consider how absentee voting has changed the election process over the years. Laws have changed to make it easier and easier to vote absentee simply as a convenience. The availability of absentee voting to virtually every voter has resulted in a tremendous increase in absentee voting throughout the state. For instance in 1994, 19.6% of the voter turnout in Bangor was through absentee balloting. In 2014 that number had increased to 42%. The increase in popularity of absentee voting has also increased the work associated with processing ballots and reporting and has put a strain on available resources. In 2011 the Legislature recognized a cut off for requesting an absentee ballot was necessary. The time afforded to municipal clerks under current law is crucial to double check work, set up for the election and get all necessary paperwork and lists ready for Election Day.



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Concerning to me is the potential for errors in an already high pressure and tense election process--nobody wants to make an error. The opportunity for error increases quickly as workers tire. Tired and rushed workers will make mistakes. When those errors occur, the integrity of the process is called into question. I, like every other municipal clerk I have met, take my responsibilities very seriously and the last thing I want to happen is for an error to be made. Eliminating the short period of time municipal clerks have to prepare for Election Day, without conducting “no reason/no excuse” absentee balloting, will increase the probability of mistakes being made.

As I understand it, the sponsors of this bill believe all voters are being disenfranchised by not being able to request an absentee ballot after the Thursday before Election Day. Statistics from the City of Bangor do not lend credence to the idea that voters are being disenfranchised because of the 3-day closed period. During the gubernatorial election in 2010 (the year before the 3-day cutoff went into effect), Bangor processed 6,663 absentee ballots. Of those ballots 1,676 were processed between the Friday and Monday preceding Election Day – 888 on Monday alone! The total voter turnout for that election was 11,179 voters. In comparison, during the 2014 gubernatorial election, 4,990 absentee ballots were processed in Bangor but the total voter turnout was 12,001. That is an increase in overall voter turnout of 822 voters! We actually had more people vote, though fewer voted absentee. Municipal Clerks have done a very good job notifying voters of the cutoff and they continue to do so at every election to make sure everyone who wants to vote absentee can request their ballot before the deadline.

The change to Section 753-B, sub-section 3 would eliminate the requirement for a 3rd party to return an absentee ballot within 2 business days. This change creates a greater opportunity for a ballot to inadvertently not be returned by the 3rd party and the integrity of that ballot is greatly compromised. The time that a 3rd party can have control over a voter’s ballot should be minimal. In my 24 years of service I have never received a complaint about the 2-day requirement and I am not clear on the need for this change.

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Perhaps the most disturbing part of LD 413 is the change allowing “no reason/no excuse” absentee balloting in the presence of the clerk up to 8:00 pm on Election Day. If a voter can come to the clerk’s office on Election Day, certainly they can go to the polling place instead. Currently, there is no requirement in the law for the clerk’s office to be open until 8:00 PM and this bill doesn’t clearly indicate that the clerk’s office would be required to extend hours. Bangor, like other communities, simply does not have the staff to accommodate this change and it would require hiring more people at an additional cost to the city. Currently on Election Day my office staff focuses on assisting those voters in need of a “special circumstance” absentee ballot due to an emergency, unexpected situation or a disability that prevents them from going to the polls. I want to ensure they continue to have the time they need to process those “special circumstance” ballots. I have grave concerns with extending “no reason/no excuse” absentee voting to include Election Day. It will create chaos for clerks who should be focusing on Election Day activities. To add the stress of “no reason/no excuse” absentee balloting on Election Day when voters can simply go to the polls creates a great burden on clerks and again increases the potential for errors that will weaken the integrity of Maine’s election process.

The citizens of Maine, as well as all of you, rely on us to conduct elections that are accurate and safeguard the integrity of the election process. We try our very hardest to follow all laws and do everything that is required of us. Our goal is not to disenfranchise the voters but to manage an overwhelming task in a manner that the voters can trust and rely upon. I join the other Maine clerks in asking that you not support LD413 and continue to provide us with the tools we need under law to conduct the type of elections that you are accustomed to and expect.

Thank you for the opportunity to present this testimony.

Respectfully Submitted,

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