

Rhode Island*Holding Power Accountable*

Testimony of Common Cause Rhode Island on H 5734--Joint Resolution to Approve and Publish and Submit to the Electors a Proposition of Amendment to the Constitution--Referendum on Line Item Veto

Position: Support

Common Cause Rhode Island supports H 5734, putting a constitutional amendment on the ballot to provide the governor the line-item veto authority. This resolution grants the governor the ability to reduce or eliminate individual appropriations.

We note that the version of a line-item veto proposed in H 5734 includes two features included in previous resolutions introduced at the request of Governor Gina Raimondo. We believe it is important that both of these features be included in any proposed amendment. The first feature requires that any veto override be conducted item by item, preventing bundling. It also prevents the governor from striking individual letters so as to use the veto power to construct new language in the legislation.

Common Cause is not a fiscal watchdog, and we do not support granting the governor line-item veto authority in the hope it will reduce our state budget. Rather, we support the line-item veto for two distinct reasons. First, it continues the rebalancing of power in Rhode Island between the legislature and executive. For centuries Rhode Island has had a strong legislature and weak executive. The 2004 Separation of Powers amendments did much to bring needed balance between the branches, but the legislature is still preeminent. Providing the governor with line-item veto authority would bring added balance between the branches.

As an organization, we are deeply concerned with transparency in government. While there have been dramatic improvements in transparency in the legislature, the budget continues to be a challenge for citizens. After months of hearings on the governor's proposed budget, the House Finance typically votes out an amended version the very night it is revealed to the public. Seven days later, after taking no public comment, the entire House of Representatives votes on this budget. Sometimes amendments are added that very night, again without public testimony.

The line-item veto would allow the governor to single out items, whether they are appropriations or changes in public policy, and assert the veto power. That would force the legislature to take them up, one at a time, and reconsider their position. This process would focus the public's attention on those issues, and force legislators to go on the record. We believe that would add much needed transparency to the budget process.

In September of 2016 Fleming and Associates conducted a survey of 400 voters in Rhode Island and asked them about their support for granting the governor line-item veto authority. 66% of voters support this change, 25% opposed it, and 8% were undecided. A majority of Rhode Islander's believe it is time for this change and we urge you to give them the chance to vote on this amendment to our constitution.