

## **Pro and Con Statements for Referendum questions in the "Voter Information Handbook"**

This legislation would provide a procedure for statements for and against statewide referenda ballot measures to be printed in the voter handbooks.

Introduced every year since 2001, Secretary of State A. Ralph Mollis gave strong support last year to this legislation, which passed in the Senate, but was defeated in the House.

OCG's interest in such legislation resulted from frustration with the explanations of the referenda questions in the 2000 general election, in particular questions 2 and 3. Question 2 for \$60 million in bonds was described as providing funds for wastewater abatement projects and funding for drinking water projects. Question 3 for \$62.5 million in bonds was described as improving highways, roads and bridges. Pro and con arguments could have informed voters that these funds were to be used for the startup costs of two of the largest projects in the history of Rhode Island (Narragansett Bay Commission's underground rainwater and sewage overflow tunnels and the relocation of Interstate 195). There was no information on the total cost of these projects and future bonding that would be necessary to complete these projects. The only explanations of these hidden projects were in the *Providence Journal* and some local newspapers.

Had there been pro and con arguments in 2002, possibly voters would have approved question 4 for \$11 million in Bonds for Quonset Point/Davisville. Voters appeared wary that they would be voting for startup costs for a container port at Quonset. There was not adequate explanation for the voters to realize this was not the case.

This legislation was modeled after California law, which allows not only arguments for and against each referendum question, but also allows rebuttal arguments for each position presented. At least fifteen states allow pro and con arguments. Those states are: Alaska, Arizona, California, Colorado, Idaho, Massachusetts, Mississippi, Montana, Nebraska, Nevada, Ohio, Oregon, South Dakota, Utah and Washington. Some of these states allow rebuttals to those arguments

Statements of support can be submitted by the sponsoring legislator and/or any individual or group he chooses. Statements in opposition are submitted by a legislator who has voted against the bill and/or any individual or group chosen by that legislator.

Passing this legislation would be a positive step towards giving the voters more information on referenda questions.