



TESTIMONY TO THE HOUSE ENVIRONMENT AND TRANSPORTATION COMMITTEE

HB 932 Public Ethics - Conflicts of Interest and Blind Trust – Governor

Position: Favorable

By: Linda Kohn, President

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The League of Women Voters of Maryland supports legislation and administrative action which will make government more responsive and accountable to the voters, such as open meetings, accessibility of records to the public, and a code of ethics for government office holders and officials. We participated in the 1998 Special Study Commission on the Maryland Public Ethics and supported their recommendations. In 1999, we also supported creation of a Commission to review the ethics laws pertaining to lobbyists and their recommendations.

We support HB 932 because it clearly lays out the expectations for a newly elected governor to place all of their financial interests (as defined in the bill) into a blind trust that has been approved by the Ethics Commission and operates in accordance with regulations adopted by that Commission. The bill also requires a newly elected governor to divest themselves of any interests (as defined in the bill) that could cause any likely conflict of interest with their public duties and requires the Governor to enter into a nonparticipation agreement with the State Ethics Commission for any interests not included in a blind trust. Specified businesses must also disclose any ownership interests held by the Governor or certain defined individuals to the Ethics Commission

It goes on to prescribe the parameters for creating the blind trust, the public notice required, and periodic updates. The bill also defines the penalties for failing to comply with the requirements.

Public confidence that an election official is acting in the best public interest rather than being influenced by their own financial interest, is essential to a well-functioning democracy. Due to the Governor's unique power as a member of the Board of Public Works and the head of the Executive Branch this bill requires much needed guidance on how to achieve the separation of personal and public interests that has been missing in law.

We urge a favorable report on HB 932.