

CONVENTION NEWS: SECRETARY OF STATE DISCUSSES CITIZEN INITIATIVES

Secretary of State Matt Dunlap mixed humor, history and personal anecdotes in a lively Convention speech about Citizens' Initiatives in Maine. Tracing their origins to an era when politicians were very "inbred and non-responsive to the public," Dunlap noted that state legislators added Citizen Initiatives to the Maine Constitution in 1908.

Dunlap then walked Convention delegates through the citizen initiative process from start to finish and discussed some procedural questions. Since "all you need are 5 registered voters" to start the process, are the thresholds too low? Dunlap noted that these provisions date to 1908 when "the streets were paved with stone, electricity was a novelty and the department of motor vehicles was three years old."

Over the years, Dunlap continued, important questions have been raised and are still often discussed. Should initiatives be allowed to be an instrument of special interests? Should you be able to "buy" a question if you have enough money? Pay signature gatherers? What issues are a good "fit" for initiatives? Which are not (he noted that they can not be used to raise revenue). Are too many being proposed (there has been a steady increase)? Also, initiatives often impact other public policy topics being considered by the legislature, what is the best way to deal with that? The wording of initiatives is another problematic topic. Dunlap noted, for example, that TABOR was "very cynical, badly written."

Admitting that when he was a legislator, he sponsored bills to ramp back citizen initiatives, believing it was a problem to send complex issues to the electorate for a simple "yes" or "no" vote, today Dunlap believes that citizen initiatives bring up important issues that bear discussion. "They stimulate public awareness and focus on topics that would otherwise not be discussed so broadly," Dunlap stated. But he also noted that if the initiative topic is one of those "punch in the gut issues," you have to look at how it affects other issues that election as well as the people running for office."

Dunlap's speech stimulated our own awareness of citizen initiatives and a lively questions and answer period followed.

--Don and Suzanne Carmichael, Deer Isle