

Voter Information Handbook

Representative Steve Smith has introduced this legislation since 2001. It allows arguments for and against referendum questions in the Secretary of State's "Voter Information Handbook. Secretary of State Ralph Mollis strongly supports this legislation.

The cost for printing the additional pages in the handbook was estimated by Secretary of State Inman's office in 2002 to be \$7,000 to \$10,000.

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). The only explanations of these hidden projects were in the *Providence Journal* and some local newspapers.

In 2002, with pro and con arguments, 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 thirteen states distribute voter information guides. Alaska, California, Idaho, Massachusetts, Nebraska, Oregon, and Utah allow pro and con arguments, some with rebuttals, with limits up to 500 words, some with no limit on the number of arguments, some allowing citizens and citizen groups to write the arguments and rebuttals.

Passing this legislation would be a positive step towards the state informing the electorate on referenda questions.