

Senate Bill 396 – Judicial Campaign Reform (*Sen. Joe Balyeat*)

Mr. Chairman, members of the committee, for the record I'm Sen. Joe Balyeat representing SD 34. Today I present SB396, which attempts to achieve some minor campaign finance reform in Supreme Court races. As this committee knows, there has been concern on both sides of the aisle with regard to judicial elections. Senate Majority Leader Ellingson is carrying a bill to attempt complete public financing of Supreme Court races. Part of his rationale is that Supreme Court judges ought to avoid even the appearance that justice can be bought in Montana. SB 396 is a much more modest attempt to deal with that same problem.

Presently, under current law, there is no limit whatsoever to PAC contributions in Supreme Court races. If you look at page 2, line 20; SB396 attempts to limit PAC contributions to \$18,000 – which is the same limit currently applied to political party committees in the governor's race. (see line 2).

The bill used to also limit third party expenditures made on behalf of a candidate, but that section of the bill was surgically removed by the Senate State Admin Committee.

In it's current form, the bill also reduces the limit n individual contributions to justices from \$250 down to \$130 (page 1, lines 16 & 17). But, after consideration, I agreed with other Senators that this part of the bill was actually counter productive – we really don't want to diminish individual contributions any more, because individuals are already at a disadvantage compared to PACS in these judge races. So I promised various Senators that I'd try to amend that part of the bill back to the current \$250 maximum, and I have an amendment drafted which I'd ask this committee to pass for that purpose.

So, in it's final form, this will be a very simple and modest bill which will simply limit total PAC contributions to \$18,000 in justice races. I think it's a small step in the right direction. In the Senate, there is bi-partisan agreement that some changes are in order; and I would hope that this bill will be given similar bi-partisan consideration in this committee. I have written copies of my testimony for the record, and I reserve the right to close.