



STATE OF MICHIGAN
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DEPARTMENT OF STATE
LANSING

Secretary of State Jocelyn Benson
Testimony in Support of the BRITE Act (House Bills 5583 and 5586)
House Committee on Ethics and Oversight
April 18, 2024

Good morning, Chair Byrnes and members of the Ethics and Oversight Committee. Thank you for inviting me to speak here today in support of the BRITE Act.

I'm here today because the citizens of Michigan deserve a government that works for them. A government that puts them first led by public servants who seek to be ethical and transparent as they lead our great state.

I'm here because for far too long we've seen scandals that illuminate a culture of corruption that does not reflect the values you, I, the Attorney General and so many others share and, frankly, harms our ability to consistently enact many important reforms.

I know that many, many Michigan lawmakers are dedicated public servants, driven by a sense of duty to their communities and a desire to improve the lives of their constituents. But these bright lights are often crowded by dark clouds of corruption that thrive in the shadows allowed by our weak ethics and transparency laws.

We were reminded of the consequences of their weakness just two days ago, when Attorney General Dana Nessel announced serious felony charges against former Michigan House Speaker Lee Chatfield.

I'm grateful to the Attorney General and her team for her meticulous investigation into the allegations against the former Speaker. But it was alarming to me that, because Michigan's disclosure, ethics and transparency laws are so weak, the evidence that led to these criminal charges was only discovered as the result of separate allegations on a completely separate matter.

The fact that the alleged financial crimes, including the egregious and blatant embezzlement of taxpayer dollars and nonprofit funds for personal gain and enrichment, were able to go undetected for so long underscores a failure of our current laws to prohibit corruption in our state government.

And as I read through the charges and outrageous revelations surrounding this case, what was clear to me is that this culture of corruption must end. Our citizens deserve better.

These bills today provide a glimmer of hope.

The package of legislation known as the BRITE Act is a significant step in the right direction to improve transparency and accountability in our state, curtail the influence of lobbying and financial interests, and enable better enforcement of disclosure and ethics requirements.

I especially want to highlight the improved campaign finance enforcement component of this legislation, which will allow the Michigan Bureau of Elections to petition the Court for an injunction to stop real-time campaign finance violations or abuses. This would enable the Bureau of Election to act to immediately stop criminal behavior, rather than wait for a months-long process to play out.

While not before the committee today, I also hope you support Rep. Byrnes' substitute for HB 5583 which would grant the Bureau clear discovery and/or subpoena power to investigate individual cases. Subpoena authority is essential because, as it stands, people can simply ignore the Bureau's requests for financial information. This makes it hard to determine what kinds of fines are needed or if the matter should be handed over to the Attorney General. And it significantly handcuffs our staff's ability to proactively police campaign finance abuse.

These enforcement provisions are critically important considering the charges announced against Chatfield this week. His alleged abuse of public and private funds was allowed to go on far too long with no legal means to discover or put a stop to the misdeeds.

It's long past time for Michigan to go from worst to first in our ethics and transparency laws. Passing this long-overdue legislation will help ensure Michigan a place where governing, lawmaking, and leading are done with integrity and in accordance with the will of the voters of this state.

Thank you.