November 18, 2022

Senator Steven M. Glazer, Chair, and Committee Members
Senate Standing Committee on Elections and Constitutional Amendments
State Capitol, Room 410
Sacramento, CA 95814

Dear Chair Glazer and Committee Members,

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony for your oversight hearing about the CAL-ACCESS Replacement System (CARS), scheduled for November 29, 2022. Please include this letter in the record as part of my testimony.

MapLight is a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization focused on transparency for money in politics. I co-founded the organization in 2005, 17 years ago, and we work both in California and nationally. MapLight has extensive experience working with CAL-ACCESS data and making it available to journalists and the public.

As part of MapLight’s work to improve transparency for campaign finance, MapLight worked with the two previous secretaries of state, Secretary Alex Padilla and Secretary Debra Bowen, to make the data in CAL-ACCESS more accessible to the public. In 2015 MapLight and Secretary Padilla launched “Power Search,” a search engine for California campaign finance data, build by MapLight, that has dramatically improved access to California campaign finance. Prior to Power Search, a citizen who wanted to see how much a particular contributor contributed to California legislators had to download two hundred separate Excel spreadsheets and somehow try to combine them. With Power Search, all this information is available on the Secretary of State’s website with a few clicks of this mouse. For seven years now, Power Search has been a main way that journalists and citizens make use of CAL-ACCESS data.

"MapLight put together a system that allows the public to quickly sort and view political contributions by candidate, donor, geography, dollar amounts and time frame. It’s now possible to instantly check not only contributions by a corporation and its political action committee, but contributions from its employees as well. The donations are updated daily. Its performance has gone from that of a VW Bug to a Tesla."

–San Francisco Chronicle

Why is it important for the public to be able to access campaign finance data? It is important because information about who is supporting our elected representatives is foundational to a healthy democracy. Oversight hearings are public. How lawmakers vote is public information. The money that candidates raise to run for office is public information too. We as citizens need transparency to know who is backing our elected officials as part of holding them accountable in a democracy. Campaign finance information from CAL-ACCESS is an essential tool for journalists, nonprofit groups, and grassroots citizens to shine a light on the forces that affect the laws and lawmakers than govern our state. Campaign finance information on who is backing candidates and ballot measure is also vital for voters to make informed decisions on how to vote
on those candidates and ballot measures. That’s why disclosure of the money contributed to campaigns is the law in every state in the country.

But such disclosure matters little when it’s difficult or impossible for citizens to obtain and make use of the information. For example, having to download two hundred separate spreadsheets to answer basic questions is “transparency” in name only, not in reality. The public’s need for transparency is why it’s so important for the state to deliver a CARS system as soon as possible that is both powerful and easy-to-use for the public.

The current CAL-ACCESS legacy system risks outages, as has happened previously, depriving the public of important transparency. The existing legacy system is also cumbersome to use, and impossible to adapt to improved and changing transparency regulations.

MapLight and California Common Cause sent a letter to the Secretary of State in 2018, during the first attempt to implement a CARS system. The letter outlines our recommendations for features to be included to make an easy-to-use and powerful public interface, so that the transparency goals of the system can be appropriately met. A copy of that letter is attached. The recommendations in it are still current today.

In addition to the recommendations in the letter, MapLight also recommends that:

- The CARS project include, as the system is developed, user testing with citizens, journalists, and nonprofit groups for the proposed public interfaces, to make sure that these interfaces meet the needs of public stakeholders.

- After the system launches to the public, there should be an additional round of user testing and gathering input from the public, journalists, nonprofits, and other public stakeholders, with an additional phase of public interface improvements implemented based on this feedback.

We applaud Secretary Weber’s decision to commission an independent analysis of the two previous failed efforts to implement a CARS system. We appreciate the work the Secretary of State staff are undertaking to implement a modern CARS system that serves the public. We are pleased to offer MapLight as a resource for a successful CARS implementation to improve transparency for all Californians.

Sincerely,

Daniel G. Newman
President & Co-Founder
MapLight

About MapLight

MapLight, a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization, has been developing and operating innovative technology in the public interest since our founding in 2005. Highlights of our work include:

- Campaign finance information systems for government that provide unprecedented transparency for the public and industry-leading efficiency for agency staff. Our clients include the City and County of Denver, Colorado and the State of Maine.
• Voter information systems, including **Voter’s Edge** (votersedge.org), a nonpartisan voting guide serving two million voters in California each election season. Voter’s Edge is a partnership of MapLight and the League of Women Voters of California Education Fund.

• **Innovative data tools** that combine campaign contributions and votes in Congress. Our data tools and research services highlight patterns of special-interest influence, for transparency and accountability.

• **Analysis and journalism** about the influence of special interest on government. MapLight’s data and reporting have appeared in more than 13,000 news stories and been seen, read, or heard over 300 million times via outlets including ABC News, Bloomberg, the Chicago Tribune, CNN, Fox Business News, Huffington Post, The Intercept, International Business Times, Newsweek, Politico, the Wall Street Journal, the Washington Post, The New York Times, and hundreds more.

**Awards**

• Society of Professional Journalists Northern California – Board of Directors’ Distinguished Service to Journalism Award, 2015
• World Affairs Council – NextGen Changemakers: Civic Innovation, 2014
• American Library Association’s MARS: Emerging Technologies in Reference – Best Free Reference Web Site, 2012
• James Madison Freedom of Information Award from the Northern California Chapter of the Society of Professional Journalists – 2009
• Library Journal – Best Reference, 2008
• Knight-Batten Award for Innovations in Journalism – Honorable Mention, 2008
• NetSquared Innovation Awards – Finalist, 2008
• Webby Awards Best Politics Website – Nominee, 2008
• Stockholm Challenge Award for Public Administration – Finalist, 2008
• U.N. World Summit Award for e.Government – Winner, 2007