



Wyandotte County Election Office

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COMMITTEE ON ETHICS, ELECTIONS, AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Testimony on Senate Bill No. 299

Tuesday, February 6, 2018

Thank you for the opportunity to testify on Senate Bill No. 299.

The proposed changes do not address the very real concern I have regarding the administration, staffing, and budget for the conduct of elections in Wyandotte County. On the one hand, it codifies what we are already doing but, on the other hand, has the potential to result in perpetuating the understaffing and underfunding of elections.

The personnel policies and procedures of the county are diligently applied to the Election Office. All employees are Unified Government (UG) employees. Hiring, terminating, personnel management and procedures are done as required by the UG Human Resources Department. Hiring, termination, promotion, pay increases, and all other personnel matters must be approved by the County Administrator. Election Office (UG) employees all receive pay and benefits just like all other UG employees.

Purchasing policies and procedures are applied to all Election Office procurements, with the purchasing staff directly involved in contracts, RFP's, and purchases greater than \$2,000.00. We avoid the dangers of acting on our own, deferring to the expert judgement of the UG Purchasing Department. The recent upgrade of our voting machines was a 4-county RFP developed with the valuable contributions of UG Purchasing. Our initial estimate of the cost of new voting machines was \$1.9M. With the help of both Purchasing and Budget, our actual costs were \$1.3M, a savings of \$600,000.00.

We actively participate in every aspect of the UG budgeting process. Annually I certify a budget only with the direct assistance of the UG Budget Department. They manage the personnel costs and capital expenses in their entirety, with the Election Office certifying a budget for operating costs and direct election expenses. In every year, the final approved budget is the result of an intensely collaborative process.

The Election Office bases the budget request on doing 3 ½ elections annually. In years when there are only two elections, we do not spend beyond what it actually costs for two elections. In years when there have been more than 3 ½ elections, we have made the budget work without using any budget reserves.

The UG uses an election levy fund to pay for the expenses of the Election Office as provided by K.S.A. 19-3435. This levy has never increased and is used as the cap for the Election Office budget. Since 2005, the UG budget has increased 185% (\$212.5M to \$395.1M). In the same period, the Election Office budget has only increased 125% (\$887,000 to \$1.1M). In 2005, the Election budget was ½ of 1% of the total UG budget. By 2017, the Election budget was just 1/3 of 1% of the total UG budget. There have been some unfortunate consequences to living with a smaller budget. A few examples:

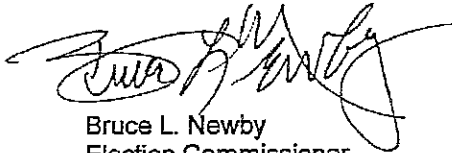
1. Budget cuts in 2008 took the funding necessary to do satellite advance voting. After 2008, we obtained a no-cost satellite voting site, but that ceased to be available to us in 2015. Paying for any satellite voting now includes the cost of the location as well as the cost of election workers.

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2. The early voting period of two weeks has been limited by funding to one week. To compensate, we have expanded voting opportunities by opening 1 to 3 satellite advance voting locations on Saturdays only.
3. A severe reduction by the UG in the 2017 election budget resulted in only having sufficient resources to do the Primary Election. Additional funding to pay for the General Election was added only after the 2017 amended budget process.
4. In 2006, we operated and staffed 59 polling places. Due to budget reductions and ADA-compliance issues, we now use only 30 polling places. That means as many as six precincts all vote in one polling place. Polling places are increasingly difficult to find and to keep. A significant factor to keeping polling places is what we are able to pay for the use of facilities. In some wards, there are no available or suitable locations.
5. In 2005, the budget was 42% personnel costs versus 58% operating and direct election costs. (Direct election costs have always included the cost of election board workers.) By 2017, the ratio had changed to 60% personnel cost to 40% operating costs. Increased personnel costs are at the expense of operating and direct election costs.
6. The only newspaper in Wyandotte County is the Kansas City Star which is primarily focused on Kansas City, MO. As a result, voters are able to obtain very limited information about Kansas elections, candidates and issues. The Election Office sends a letter to every voter household 30 days before every election and a postcard at the beginning of the advance voting period. The letter announces the upcoming election and provides an application to receive an advance ballot by mail. The postcard gives the dates, times and locations for early in-person voting as well as polling place information for election day. Funding prevents us from doing anything more.

Current law and the supporting Attorney General Opinions (2017-011, in particular) have been the only leverage we have had to make our case for the funding of elections. Changing the law only invites further reduction of necessary resources. Each budget year is a battle to get and retain the resources we need. I am convinced that this proposed change to the law will make the process more difficult and does not serve the interests of our voters.

Accordingly, I stand in opposition to this bill.



Bruce L. Newby
Election Commissioner