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HOUSE ELECTIONS COMMITTEE HEARING ON S Sub for SB 171

Opposition Testimony to S Sub for SB 171 on behalf of the City of Shawnee

By Katie Killen, Assistant City Manager
March 11, 2015

Honorable Chair and members of the House Elections Committee,

The City of Shawnee strongly opposes S Sub for SB 171. As part of their 2015 State Legislative Program, the City of Shawnee's Governing Body unanimously adopted the following position:

The City supports the current schedule and structure of local elections and is opposed to any legislation that would require local elections be conducted with partisan identification, or vacancies in non-partisan elected positions be filled through partisan means.

This bill, in its current form, moves elections to the fall of odd numbered years and removes the partisanship element. As promising as it is that this bill removes the partisanship component and untangles local elections from the fall of even numbered years, it still creates a great deal of change state-wide with little to show that it will increase voter turnout.

In addition to this, members of the Kansas legislature seem ready to push for local elections to be held in the fall of even numbered years. Although the new house proposed "compromise" language keeps elections non-partisan and puts local races at the top of the ballot, several issues remain. The City of Shawnee opposes this for the following reasons:

- Moving elections to the fall of even numbered year's crowds out local issues. This fall election cycle already has many issues and candidates that need to be covered by the media. Adding local elections to this only decreases the coverage of these races and the amount of information going out to voters on local races.
- Moving elections to the fall of even numbered years also limits voters' ability to thoroughly research candidates and issues based on the number of items that will be on their ballot if this bill should pass.
- Although the House compromise claims to be non-partisan, having it in the fall of even numbered years opens the door for party involvement. Even as this compromise was being discussed, there was almost an expectation that party involvement would occur. If it is truly the aim to allow partisan politics to play out



within local elections, then it does so with disregard to what residents have expressly supported in our City Charter ordinances; that our City utilizes non-partisan elections.

Finally, there were several amendments that were picked up on the Senate floor before this bill was passed. One of which essentially eliminates mail-in ballots for local sales tax issues and forces them to the primary or general election. This is problematic in two ways. First, it severely limits a city's ability to hold such elections. The reason it limits a city's ability is that it only allows for these elections at two very specific times a year in August or November. The House "compromise" would more severely restrict these elections by only allowing them to take place twice every two years in even numbered August and even number November. Second in eliminating the option of mail-in ballots, it does away with an election option that is known to drive voter turnout. Eliminating such an option seems to fly in the face of the goal of this bill.

For these reasons, the City of Shawnee asks the House committee to allow us to continue to operate our elections the way we have for years. That is, holding them in the spring, on a truly non-partisan basis, and to have the option of holding special elections through mail-in ballots.

Thank you for your consideration.

