



Testimony of the Kansas Association of Counties
To the House Elections Committee
Neutral Testimony on Substitute for Senate Bill 171 (Local Elections)

March 11, 2015

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee:

Substitute for Senate Bill 171 moves municipal elections to the fall of odd-numbered years. This includes elections for extension districts, cities, boards of public utilities, water districts, drainage districts, irrigation districts, unified school districts, and community colleges—all of which currently hold elections in the spring. The Kansas Association of Counties is neutral on this proposal. Regarding the proposal to move elections to the fall of even years with locals at the top of the ballot, however, moves KAC firmly to an opponent of the bill. During today's hearing, the Kansas County Clerks & Election Officials Association will describe the increased expenses of the even-year proposal. With this consideration, KAC asks this committee to focus its deliberations on the current proposal in Substitute for SB 171.

In its original form, KAC opposed SB 171 for three primary reasons: (1) it creates the prospect of an excessively long ballot; (2) the policy change will increase costs; and (3) there are more conservative and incremental measures to address voter turnout. These are all in addition to the structural challenges of extending or shortening the terms of currently elected officials. The Senate Elections Committee responded to these concerns with the substitute bill currently before this committee. Substitute for SB 171 now eliminates the county concerns for effectively executing local elections in a cost-efficient manner.

On page two of this testimony, I have provided my expanded arguments against SB 171's even-year initiative, which all return under the proposal to alter the language currently in Substitute for SB 171. As the bill currently stands, however, KAC remains a neutral conferee.

Respectfully,
Nathan Eberline
Legal Counsel

Testimony Excerpt Against Even-year Local Elections (Original SB 171)

KAC has worked closely with the Kansas County Clerks & Election Officials Association (KCCEOA) to identify the most substantial structural problems. KCCEOA is similarly opposing SB 171, and KAC is subsequently focusing on a few key areas of shared concern:

1. Unwieldy Ballot Length

- a. Current ballot machines count each page as a separate ballot. This increases the likelihood of error when tallying ballots because most counties will be unable to place every race on the front and back of a single ballot. Further, adding local elections would create a substantial amount of information for each voter to remember and consider for each election. The issues are too important at each level of government to risk voters missing elections and ballot initiatives. On page four of SB 171, the legislation requires county election officers to “develop ways to reduce the ballot KAC Testimony | Page 2 the voting process on election days.” Our election officials have already provided such proposals with the suggestion to either maintain the current elections cycle or move all local elections to the fall of odd years. The proposal in SB 171 ensures that ballot length and the necessary time for voting will be an unnecessary challenge.

2. Increased Elections Expense

- a. Some advocates of changing the timeframe for elections have mentioned the potential cost savings. But our elections officials maintain that this will be cost-neutral at best with a real prospect of rising costs by moving elections to the fall of even years. There will still occasionally be a need for special elections to address issues that spring elections currently address—this will add cost. Tight deadlines in the new fall elections will make ballot printing a rushed requirement, which adds expense. The local filings, appointment of campaign treasurers, filing of Statements of Substantial Interest, and other campaign issues will tack-on to the Secretary of State’s current duties for state and federal elections—again adding to the workload and potential expense. The County Clerks Association also highlighted the current efficiency of elections workers maintaining continuity from election to election. If this changes to the more infrequent election approach, the result could also add to the cost of running elections. These considerations pose a risk of increasing the cost of running local elections, whereas the current system allows for thoughtful budget planning with balanced costs from year to year.

3. Less-obtrusive Alternatives

- a. During the December 12, 2014 meeting for the Special Committee on Ethics, Elections, and Local Government, the members heard from three of our county clerks. During the discussion, the clerks mentioned ideas like advanced voting, mail ballots, voting centers, and Saturday elections. These policy changes increase voter turnout, as shown by earlier conferees like Wendy Underhill of National Conference of State Legislatures. These ideas would allow Kansas to pursue increased voter turnout without the concerns expressed by our local officials.