



SB 171
Testimony to Senate
Committee on Ethics and Elections
By: Jason A. Gage on behalf of the Salina City Commission
February 11, 2015

Request

Thank you for the opportunity to offer to you the City of Salina's position on SB 171. We are very appreciative of your time to consider this written testimony. With that said, we respectfully request that you oppose the passage of SB 171.

Bill Summary

Our understanding of the primary components of this bill is that it would place all municipal elections on the fall ballot of even numbered years (same as state and federal elections and would also make local elections partisan in nature by requiring candidates to disclose party affiliation.

Bill Concerns

We have serious concerns about this bill, a summary of which are as follows:

- Fall Election Date. Certainly election turnout is an issue for all communities. We all search for ideas to increase citizen participation and eliminate election apathy. However, we are not aware of objective research that suggests a combined fall election ballot will actually increase voter turnout. Our local experience has indicated that a specific ballot question or candidate is more often a stimulant to voter turnout than the date of the election.
- Shared Ballot. We believe that sharing a ballot containing an already voluminous number of county, state and federal candidates and related questions will disrupt the

attention needed for local candidates and municipal questions. We can all agree that voters have a responsibility to pay attention to local candidates and issues. However, local topics can easily get overshadowed by the negative and over publicized campaign rhetoric associated with state and federal campaigns. We believe the end result of combining local, county, state and federal ballot issues would be to render local elections meaningless. This is something we wish to avoid.

- Cost Savings. At first glance, the combining of elections does appear to make sense with regard to saving tax dollars. However, we have not yet seen solid evidence to suggest that cost savings will actually occur. Combining elections will also bring about other logistical issues that have cost impacts and will need to be addressed.
- Timing Logistics. We are concerned that fall elections will disrupt the current operating and capital improvement budget consideration currently in line with the timing of board member changes, particularly for school boards. This is a minor concern, but something worth noting.
- Increased Partisanship. We strongly oppose any form of partisanship being brought to local elections. Due to the current nonpartisan nature of local government in Kansas, most of our small and medium sized cities do not experience the type of negative partisanship that often occurs at the state or federal levels.

A city's primary mission is simply to effectively and efficiently deliver core, essential services to the public's front doorstep. This mission doesn't typically lend itself to partisan or ideological debates. In short, we believe mostly in "governance" and not "politics" for local policy making. With nonpartisan elections, candidates voted into local office can serve as independent, pragmatic problem solvers. Salina has found this helpful as we address community development, street and utility projects, parks and recreation enhancements and other community needs. This approach has also served us well with regard to preserving sound, conservative financial administration.

We are very concerned that increased partisanship will result in ideological turf battles that conflict with the business approach often employed by the commission-manager form of government. As you may already know, this form of government was intended to reflect to the highest degree possible a "business approach" to the management of cities. It was actually spawned at the grass roots level in the early 1900s from the

negative aspects of power politics that crossed both ethical and legal boundaries. Adding partisanship to this form of government certainly carries with it the potential to destroy the inherently professional nature of commission-manager cities and cause business-oriented city managers and administrators to find jobs in other states. Finally, please know that Kansas' roots for business-oriented, commission-manager government run very deep, resulting in Kansas being a national model for professional local government.

Requested Action

Certainly, we agree with legislative changes that increase effectiveness and efficiency, and reduce cost to our citizens. However, we do not believe SB 171 will result in these results. As a result, we respectfully request that you oppose SB 171.

Thank you for considering our legislative request!