



TESTIMONY IN OPPOSITION OF SB 171 – Elections; municipalities and special districts; spring to fall; other changes

To: Senator Mitch Holmes, Chair
Members of the Senate Committee on Ethics and Elections

From: Members of the Governing Body, City of Lenexa
Mike Boehm, Mayor
Joe Karlin, Ward 1
Steve Lemons, Ward 1
Diane Linver, Ward 2
Tom Nolte, Ward 2
Lou Serrone, Ward 3
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Andy Huckaba, Ward 4
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Date: February 11, 2015

Honorable Chairman and Members of the Senate Committee on Ethics and Elections, the Governing Body of Lenexa thanks you for the opportunity to provide testimony opposing SB 171.

Kansas has enjoyed a long history of nonpartisan, municipal elections contested in the spring of odd-numbered years. The current framework for local elections has served our community well and we believe that altering them will have a negative impact on the effective and efficient governance of our city.

First and foremost, moving local elections to coincide with national and state elections invites the bifurcated and unworkable political environment of Washington, D.C. to our local communities. Americans broadly disapprove of the job Congress is doing and consistently rate local governments as the most accessible, effective, responsive, responsible, and transparent level of government. It seems counterintuitive to emulate a highly partisan system that many people believe isn't working.

Furthermore, making municipal elections partisan would put members of the military who currently, or may wish to, serve their communities on school boards, city councils, or county commissions in direct violation of Department of Defense Directive 1344.10,



Political Activities by Members of the Armed Forces. Those men and women in uniform, who have been duly elected by their peers, would be forced to give up their office, or may be faced with violating the Uniform Code of Military Justice. Similarly, this measure would disqualify thousands of Kansans who are federal employees from serving their communities in local office due to the bill's conflict with the Hatch Act.

It should also be noted that moving local elections to the fall would result in longer and more cumbersome ballots. This will likely result in greater ballot fatigue than we currently see in our elections. This is worrisome because voters may not put the thought and care into selecting who represents them when they get to the bottom of their ballot. We want citizens to be informed about the candidates and issues and be attentive to the privilege of voting. Making the voting process lengthier may result in lower voter participation and turnout, which is the opposite result this bill is aimed to produce.

Next, it is unwise make local candidates and issues compete with state and national office-seekers when it comes to campaigning. State and national races expend a significant amount of resources on print, radio, and television marketing and advertising. The cost of campaigning at the local level during the state and national election cycle may become too expensive for many citizens to have a fair chance at getting their campaign message out. This is just another way that money and national partisan politics will overshadow critically important local issues and races.

Finally, making a move to fall elections may negatively impact the local budgeting process and officeholder transition. For those officials whose terms would expire before the bill's proposed first fall election, it is uncertain whether incumbents would serve through the interim period before newly-elected officials were seated, or if an office is simply left vacant. Currently, the budgeting process begins in the spring with newly-elected officials able to contribute to the budgeting process right away and vote to adopt the budget in August. Moving these elections to the fall means that newly-elected officials would have to wait nearly a year before being able to vote on a budget. For those officeholders whose term only lasts two years, they may potentially be involved in only one full budget process before they leave office.

There are several reasons we believe this bill is problematic. Local elections in Kansas have enjoyed autonomy and nonpartisanship for a long time. We believe they work well for our community and will continue to do so as long as they remain unchanged. Inserting party politics and the competition for campaign resources into local races will negatively impact our community's ability to govern ourselves efficiently and effectively. Potentially denying several Kansans from serving their communities in local office is also something we cannot endorse. We support the current schedule and structure of local elections and oppose SB 171. We ask that you do the same.