

City of Paola, Kansas

To: Chair Mitch Holmes and members of the Senate Committee on Ethics and Elections

From: Jay Wieland, Paola City Manager

Date: February 9, 2015

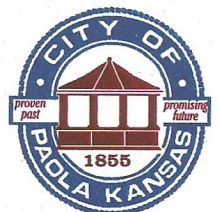
RE: Opposition to proposed bill to change of local elections

Thank you for the opportunity to submit written testimony on behalf of the City of Paola.

The Paola City Council would like to go on record as being opposed to the proposed legislation that would make all city elections partisan by placing those elections on the same ballot as state and federal elections in November of even years. The governing body of the City of Paola believes that its current system of non-partisan, ward elections with two-year terms best serves the preferences of the citizens of Paola. It was these very citizens who selected and put in place the system that has served the community well for many years and continues to do so to this very day.

Before I list out several reasons why the Paola City Council opposes the proposed changes to municipal self-governance, let me relate a story about a recent public meeting at which many of Paola's local businesses owners, bankers, public servants, Chamber of Commerce members, and citizens expressed their opposition to state interference in local elections. Paola Mayor Artie Stuteville and representatives for Paola Unified School District 368 and Miami County were involved in a Chamber of Commerce sponsored "State of the City, School District, and Miami County" forum. As part of that forum, attendees were invited to ask the panel of presenters questions concerning local issues and concerns.

One of the questions dealt specifically with possible state legislation that might affect cities, counties, and school districts. As expected, the discussion touched on the state's budget problems, the school finance issues, highway funding, diminishing revenues for local governmental units, and the possibility of a state-forced change to local elections. Of all the items discussed, the proposed changes to local elections generated the most passionate comments. It was obvious from the response of those in attendance that there was no desire to see local elections made partisan or to be combined with the state and federal election cycle. The popular sentiment was that April, non-partisan local elections give the best opportunity for community representation and participation.



Why is the Paola City Council opposed to the proposed change to make local elections partisan and to hold them in November of even years? Well, there are many answers to that question; among them are the following:

1. The proposed legislation would force all 3,812 elected city officials and even more school board members and other local governmental officials and special district board members to serve either shorter or longer terms than for which they were elected—something that is truly an encroachment on the election decisions made by the citizens of our Kansas communities.
2. The proposed changes would lengthen the ballot, confuse voters by adding even more jurisdictional boundaries, create an election environment that makes it more difficult to focus on individual races and local issues, and create primary election problems for non-affiliated voters thus causing additional, unnecessary confusion among voters and election officials and workers.
3. The proposed changes, especially to partisan elections, would prohibit federal employees and active duty military personnel from being candidates in local elections. What an injustice and disservice to our brave and patriotic men and women of our Armed Forces!
4. Citizens of communities throughout this state would be “short-changed” in an election cycle that would minimize or cause local issues to get lost in all the federal and state campaigning.

But the Paola City Council’s best answer to the question is the simplest—“the citizens of Paola rightfully selected their form of government and established the term length and ward system of representation they believe best serves their interests and desires.”

In closing, the Paola City Council would like to acknowledge that its members understand the concerns related to low voter turnout in local elections and the concerns about voter apathy. These are issues that all of those involved in governance should be concerned with and should actively seek to find acceptable solutions for the problems. But to implement a system of partisan elections that would be unnecessarily lost in a federal and state election cycle is not an answer that best serves the citizens of this state’s cities and towns.

To adopt a system that is broken from the onset, that doesn’t save money, that penalizes true local governance, that takes away a system that has worked throughout the history of Kansas, and that, by state legislative action, takes away local self-determination does not appear to be for “the greater good” or provide for more effective and efficient governance. It is the sincere belief of the Paola City Council that better options exist for increasing turnout for city elections without distorting election results, prohibiting active duty military and federal employees from running, and creating overly complex ballots. Among these are:

- All-mail ballot elections for local elections
- Broadening the number of candidates on the ballot by expanding the candidates needed before a primary election is held

- Better education of local voters broadening and reinforcing the ability of local political jurisdictions to adopt systems that best work for them
- Allowing local jurisdictions to decide by a vote of their citizens whether or not to adopt partisan elections

To quote an elderly citizen and voter of Paola, "I agree with the comments about partisan elections as I know that I've never seen a pothole in a street that had an "R", a "D", or an "I" on it, nor have I ever seen a child walking to school with any of those letters on them. Partisan politics for local elections is a bad idea, and doesn't accomplish anything except give control to the best funded or most vocal party."

Thank you for allowing me to share the thoughts and beliefs of the Paola City Council with you. The council knows that you have many special interests trying to influence and even guide your decisions, but asks that you "step back" and truly think about what best serves the citizens of the communities in our great state of Kansas.

Respectfully submitted on behalf of the Paola Governing Body:

Artie Stuteville, Mayor

Jim Pritchard, Council President, Ward 1

Leigh House, Council Vice-President, Ward 3

Gee Gee Wilhoite, Council Member, Ward 2

Aaron Nickolson, Council Member, Ward 4