



Despite some progress, officials call for more election reforms

by Mike McCabe

When voters nationwide go to the polls on Nov. 5, there will be more at stake than meets the eye. In states and counties across the country, election administrators and other observers will be closely monitoring the voting process in an effort to evaluate both the effectiveness of recently implemented election reforms and the need for additional improvements.

If this year's primaries are any indication, the results are likely to be mixed. The attention given to voting procedures in the wake of the 2000 presidential election was intense and produced a flurry of reform activity at the state level, but the progress to date has been uneven. Voters in many jurisdictions have already been exposed to new technologies and procedures, while some will test changes for the first time in November and others will notice little change at all. As the recent primary in Florida demonstrated all too clearly, even where significant reforms have already been implemented, there are still some bugs to be worked out.

One likely result of the fall contests will be renewed calls for officials at both the state and federal levels to complete the unfinished work of election reform. As a congressional conference committee continues to work on federal legislation, the states will reassess their own needs and continue pursuing efforts to restore public confidence in the electoral process.

MLC offers recommendations

A recent report issued by the Midwestern Legislative Conference's Elections Task Force concluded that despite significant progress in several states in the Midwest, there is still much work to be done on election reform across the region. Co-chaired by Wisconsin Rep. Stephen Freese and Minnesota Sen. Steve Kelley, the 18-member task force (which included 15 legislators and three secretaries of state representing the 11 MLC states) identified six priority issue areas and developed 35 policy recommendations for consideration by Midwestern lawmakers and members of the U.S. Congress.

Recently distributed throughout the region, the report includes suggested actions regarding voter registration, positive voter identification, polling procedures, the presidential selection process, the timing and release of election results, and the appropriate roles of the states and the federal government with respect to the administration of elections. Highlights include the following:

- States that require pre-election registration should establish statewide electronic voter registration databases.
- States should clarify the voting rights of convicted felons and the criteria for restoring privileges to those who have completed their sentences.
- States should establish a single, statewide, unique voter identification number system to

reduce fraud and to ensure the accuracy of registration databases.

- States should expand the pool of potential poll workers by permitting/encouraging the recruitment of split-shift workers, high school students and retired citizens.
- States and counties should ensure nondiscriminatory, equal and secure access to the voting process for all voters.
- States should permit additional alternatives to election-day voting in polling places.
- States should adopt clear definitions of what constitutes a vote for each type of voting system used.
- States should consider establishing a rotating system of regional presidential primaries.
- The Midwestern states should embargo the release of presidential election results until all polls have closed in the continental United States.
- States should retain primary authority and control over the administration of elections.

The full task force report, including all 35 recommendations and an overview of recent election reform efforts in the Midwest, can be found online at www.csgmidwest.org. The report was endorsed by the MLC in August. For further information, please call The Council of State Governments' Midwestern Office at 630/810-0210. 🚩

Taking pride in the Capitol is a long tradition in Kansas

by Tim Anderson

When the digging around the Kansas Capitol began early this year, it marked the start of years of planned construction on the grounds of the century-old building. The work, though, was far from the beginning of the renovation process.

A Capitol Renovation Commission composed of several legislators had laid the groundwork, developing a plan to preserve a place nearly as old as the state itself (construction on it began in 1867).

"We wanted to make the Capitol a place the people of Kansas could continue to be proud of, and I believe we have accomplished that [with the renovation plans]," says Kansas Senate President Dave Kerr, who has served as chair of the commission.

A similar philosophy inspired Kansas leaders in 1866, when they decided to build a capitol for the young state that would match any of the more-established eastern states' capitol buildings.

Pride is only one of the many reasons for the current construction project; practicality is another. The first work being done involves the construction of an underground parking garage, which

lawmakers say will improve aesthetics and access to the building. The garage also will eliminate the need for parking around the building. As a result, security will be improved, an important consideration in the wake of the Oklahoma City bombing in 1995 and Sept. 11 terrorist attacks, Kerr says.

The renovation project, which is expected to last at least eight years, will rewire offices and improve the building's heating and air conditioning system. Offices and meeting rooms will be enlarged to allow people greater access to the inner workings of state government in Kansas, and a new visitors center will be added. Meanwhile, the deteriorating limestone on the outside of the building, along with the marble floor and woodwork inside the Capitol, will be restored.

The Kansas Legislature already has authorized the sale of \$55 million in bonds for the first phase of the project (\$15 million for the underground parking garage and \$40 million for preliminary work on the inside). Overall costs of the project have been estimated at about \$150 million.



Renovation of the Kansas Capitol has begun, with construction of an underground parking garage being the first step in the multiyear project. (Source: Kansas Legislature)

Until recently, plans to fix the Capitol had moved forward with relatively little controversy, but more disputes are beginning to surface, partially as a result of the recent economic downturn. "When

we started the process, revenue was pouring into the state at amounts higher than expected," Kerr says. "That's not the case anymore, so there could be some more difficulties when funding for the second phase comes around."

Some differences recently arose over work on the Capitol dome. The Legislature had placed in its appropriations bill language prohibiting any state money from being spent this year on the dome,

which needs to be strengthened in order to place a 6,000-pound statue on top of it.

Republican Gov. Bill Graves vetoed the prohibition, allowing the dome project to move forward.

The recent conflict underscores the fact that like the Capitol renovation itself, debate over the project is far from complete — especially during a time when the state's budget conditions are particularly tenuous. 🚩