

Voters First Advisory Commission

Public Hearing

Monday, July 9, 2007

Council Chambers - Middletown Town Hall, Middletown, RI

Commission Members Present:

Secretary of State A. Ralph Mollis

Senator Juan Pichardo

Senator June Gibbs

Representative Joseph Almeida

Sue Stenhouse, Governor's Deputy Director of Community Relations

Ken McGill, Pawtucket Board of Canvassers

Jan Ruggiero, Director, Secretary of State's Elections Division

Roger Harris, RI Disability Vote Project

Staff Members Present:

Paul Caranci, Deputy Secretary of State

Mark Welch, Esq.

Pam Lombardi, Administrative Assistant

Chris Barnett, Communications Director

Bob Graziano

Rob Rock

Michael Narducci

Johanna Petrarca

General Public Present:

40 public members in attendance

Summary of Hearing:

Chairman Mollis opened the hearing with an explanation of the purpose of the hearing, an explanation of the 10-point reform program, an introduction of the Commissioners, notice of the remaining two (2) hearing dates, locations and an explanation of how to reach the Commission with comments.

Chairman Mollis explained the rules of the hearing and informed the audience that there was a Spanish interpreter as well as a “signer” for the hearing impaired available if those services were needed.

Finally, Chairman Mollis introduced Middletown Council members Theresa Santos and Barbara Barrows, Middletown Democratic Party Chair David Lavine and Republican Party Chair Sal DeRuggiero and Rick O’Neil, all of whom attended the hearing.

Commissioners introduced themselves. Jan Ruggiero with 26 years of experience in the Elections Division of the State of RI: Ken McGill representing City and Town Clerks of RI: Sen. Juan Pichardo voice of the people of Providence, Portsmouth Middletown Senator Gibbs welcomed Committee Members to Middletown and stated the purpose of the Commission was as simple as ABC.

A- to register every person who is eligible to vote

B- to allow every one a chance to vote with no problem

C- No one who should NOT vote is allowed to.

Sue Stenhouse- former candidate for the office of Secretary of State, is passionate about all of the issues on the agenda, hoping to make election procedures more viable. Roger Harris representing 26 organizations stated his intentions of being a committee member is to bring a voice for the disabled.

Secretary Mollis informed those in attendance that the entire Commission is staffed (legal and secretarial) by the Secretary of State at no cost to taxpayers.

Final dates have changed for the next two hearings. August 6th in Warwick and August 20th in Kingston. Sign up sheet in order. Those who spoke previously will wait until everyone has had a chance to speak. Those who are depending on transportation such as RIDE will be given the opportunity to speak sooner if necessary. If anyone wishes to speak a second time after the allotted 5 minutes; they may after everyone else has had a chance to speak.

Fredericka Athenas:

- Is aware of voter apathy, particularly in East Providence, and would like the Commission to focus on that area in the voter registration process.**

Alex Walsh, Esq.:

- Serves as Chair of the Newport Canvassing Authority.**

- Agrees with Senator Gibbs sentiments to expand the number of voters.**
- Concerned with trend of lack of participation among youth. While people in their 50's, 60's and 70's vote in large numbers, those in their 20's, 30's and 40's do not.**
- Commission should focus efforts on how to motivate young voters. Should examine best practices around the country.**
- Consider post card registration and possibly post card voting.**
- Supports all of the proposals listed, especially, expanded voting days, privacy (simply move booths further apart and study what happens when ballots are rejected and examined by workers to determine why), 50 foot radius expansion (should be no intrusion on voters at the polls) most people who vote on election day have already decided on their candidates Canvassing is an invasion**
- Supports earlier closing time of polls, using real estate agents to register voters at closings and implementation of a program to register college students.**
- Signage- signs on public property are freedom of speech; possibility of flexibility for local Boards re: signs.**

John Robitaille:

- Was a candidate in the last general election and lost by 4 votes. Was behind by 13 after mail ballots were counted. Had to go to court 4 times to have all ballots recounted. The result was to pick up 9 votes. It proves that even the best of technology isn't foolproof, so it shouldn't require 4 court appearances to get a recount of all ballots.**

- Voting lists are not accurate. He knows of someone who moved to Florida then died 3 years before election and the name was still on the voting list. Cost of mailing list for candidates is high for inaccurate info.**
- Need better poll worker training. Scanner went down in senior center and that created a problem. Witnessed 12-13 people leaving because lines were too long.**
- Eliminate straight party ticket voting. 9% of voters voted that way in his district. Voters should have to look at all the candidates individually.**

Saverio DeRuggerio:

- Served as a poll checker in general election and primary. Heard workers tell people that they had a choice to voter with a “master lever” or not. They were not told that they can also vote by individual if they check the party ticket. Should abolish the master lever; can be confusing for voters.**
- Favors photo ID.**
- Favors using Realtors to register voters but in town like Middletown there are a large number of seasonal renters.**

Jack Selvagio:

- Agrees with Sen Gibbs 3 pts.**
- People can register on-line, claim to be a citizen, show up at polls and it is up to the Canvassing Board to determine if you are truly a citizen. Would like proof of citizenship required.**

- Favors photo ID but only if you are a citizen.**
- Doesn't feel the Commission is neutral considering some members of the Commission publicly oppose some of these issues.**

Chairman Mollis noted he created a commission that represented both elected and non-elected people from all geographic areas without regard to party affiliation.

Representative Almeida explained that he, and Senator Pichardo, are not interested in seeing non-citizens vote, but work hard to ensure everyone who is eligible has the opportunity to participate in the process. He has an open mind.

Senator Pichardo said that while he represents a minority community he works in the interest of all people. He experienced election problems that led to his filing a complaint in the 2000 election. He was also involved in a close race in which his candidate lost by 11 votes. He is sensitive to everyone's issues and wants to ensure that the Commission is sensitive to the needs of all people without disenfranchising anyone.

Commissioner Stenhouse noted that she enjoys the fact that all members came to the Commission with different backgrounds and issues. If the Commission can't come up with a consensus, how can it expect the General Assembly to pass the legislation it puts forward.

The Commission will make the efforts to change the way people vote more effective.

Herb Raymond:

- Extend voting dates and times.**
- Create shifts for poll workers.**
- Include photos of candidates on the ballot.**

Commissioner Harris noted that Mr. Raymond was afraid to come to the podium as are many people with disabilities. Up until last year it was difficult for him to vote. The RI Disability Vote Project helped him to vote last year. 85% of the disabled people don't vote. Mr. Raymond is the exception.

Merle Goter:

- Poll workers experience long days and little compensation. Stretching out the number of voting days will make this problem worse.**
- Should not register every voter. Would prefer that only those who are informed vote. If someone needs to be rounded up and dragged to the polls, he shouldn't be voting.**

Christine Lopes – Common Cause

- She is a new voter in RI but recognizes that a disabled person would have difficulty accessing some polling places. Some areas are not wide enough to allow a wheelchair or person with a walker through.**
- Commission should look at system of public funding of campaigns because money is a driving force in elections.**

- Supports poll worker training programs.
- Supports cleanup of voter rolls. Strongly supports computerized statewide list connected to death records and address registers.
- Should use guidance counselors at high schools and colleges to register voters.
- Supports elimination of straight party lever. Many people don't know that you can also vote for an individual after voting straight party. Also, national trend is to move away from straight ticket voting.
- Opposes photo ID because:

There are very few documented voter fraud cases. In 2006 the Dept. of Justice convicted only 86 people of voter fraud and no cases could have been avoided by using a photo ID.

Where there is evidence of fraud, it is not something that would be addressed by photo ID.

Instead of ID, make RI voter lists as accurate and strong as possible.

Chairman Mollis noted that at the last Commission Workshop, the Commission decided to expand its work into the next few years so as to make the 2008 legislative package manageable and providing the opportunity to submit another package in 2009.

David Levine:

- Served 9 terms in the Connecticut General Assembly so he understands the difficulty of the office.
- There appears to be a conflict of being open to, and suspicious of,

non-registered voters. This has been fueled by the recent immigration problems.

- Make high school students part of the electoral process.**
- Think in terms of what is available today in advanced technology. How can we link ourselves to how people will be conducting their lives in the near future.**
- Experience has shown that we should make absentee registration and voter registration easier.**

Chris Young:

Stated that:

· He filed complaint with Dept. of Justice 2 weeks ago. Providence reacted by saying they would remove 17,000 names from the Providence voting rolls. Wants an explanation of why they waited to clean up the voting rolls. Demands an investigation by the Secretary of State. He wants to be a party to the investigation and demands copies of the statewide voter rolls and the list of 17,000 names. Wants the Secretary of State to investigate to see if any of the 17,000 people being removed from the list voted in the last election.

· Photo ID may be unconstitutional. Prefers taking a photo of every voter as they enter the polling place.

· Comments included in his opinion that the “Secretary of State’s office and the Board of Elections are corrupt and conspire to fix elections.”

· There is no set of confirmed numbers of voters and ballots. In

Providence there were 1,200 missing ballots. Should have an application to vote rather than a scanned sheet.

Chairman Mollis gave closing remarks. The next hearing will be held on August 6 at the Warwick Public Library. No workshop will be held until after that date. After the next workshop white paper will be drafted to be submitted. The hearing was adjourned at 8:10 P.M.