

Voters First Advisory Commission

Organizational Meeting

May 21, 2007 – 4:00 – 5:20 P.M.

State House – Room 135

Providence, RI 02903

Commission Members Present:

A. Ralph Mollis, Secretary of State, Chair

Rep. Jon Brien, Woonsocket

Rep. Joseph Almeida, Providence

Sen. June Gibbs, Middletown

Sen. Juan Pichardo, Providence

Sue Stenhouse, Warwick

Kenneth McGill, Pawtucket Board of Canvassers

Roger Harris, RI Disability Vote Project

Jan Ruggiero, Secretary of State's Elections Division

Bob Kando, Board of Elections

Staff Members Present:

Paul Caranci

Pam Lombardi

Mark Welch, Esq.

General Public Present:

Christine Lopes, Common Cause

Linda N. Ward, RI Disability Vote Project

Amy Vitale, ACLU

Summary of Meeting:

Chairman Mollis introduced members of the Commission and explained that the purpose of the Advisory Commission is to provide the information necessary for him to introduce an election reform legislative package that is reflective of the needs of the community and will represent the best approach to election reform that can be initiated. This will be accomplished by researching best practices nationally, taking testimony from RI residents regarding their needs and concerns, and keeping an open mind with regard to the issues discussed. The involvement of each member will be critical to the project's success and he will need the information and opinions of everyone in order to carry out the Commission's mission.

In response to Representative Almeida's question, Chairman Mollis noted that while he has placed 10 items on the agenda, this is only a starting point and that issues may be added by Commission members and/or the general public at any of the public hearings. The Commissioners will determine which of these items deserve discussion, which deserve inclusion in a legislative package, and in what year the issue should be raised for further discussion and

introduction. He noted that any legislator or member of the public can have legislation introduced even if an issue does not make it into the Secretary's legislative package.

Sue Stenhouse suggested that the Commission ask legislative leaders to allow the Commission to complete its work prior to taking action on any significant election reform bills this year. Senator Gibbs and Representatives Brien and Almeida said that they have agreed to postpone serious discussion on the Photo ID bills before the Senate and House this year awaiting the outcome of the Commissions work. It was noted, however, that Representative Pacheco's bill to allow pre-registration of 16 and 17 year olds did pass the House and was sent to the Senate. It was a consensus of the Commission to make a formal request of the Leadership.

Representative Brien noted that he would like to "quarterback" the Photo ID issue. However, he would refrain from a formal position and instead opt to assemble a whitepaper of pros and cons after hearing all testimony. Again, it was a consensus of the Commission that this be the approach to all issues discussed.

Roger Harris noted that he represents some 26 groups that impact people with disabilities and they would prefer that a focus be placed on how to overcome issues limiting or effecting their rights, not simply on issues that impact their ability to vote. For example, instead of focusing on the narrow issue of how to develop photo ID,

the group should focus on the broader issue of how to provide those without birth certificates, etc. the ability to get an ID. It was generally agreed that addressing issue that impact any voters ability to vote is a concern of the Commission. Mr. Harris was also informed that he should take into consideration the sentiments of all 26 groups that he represents unless those groups send representatives to the public hearings.

Other concerns are that the Commission will need the assistance of other State Agencies, we will have to comply with all HAVA laws and we will have to be sensitive to the fiscal impact of whatever is proposed. Chairman Mollis suggested that these are all good reasons to follow each hearing with a “work session.”

A suggestion was made that we try to tape some of the hearings for broadcast on Cable TV. Staff will follow-up to see if this can be accomplished. It was also suggested that meetings be advertised in local newspapers, through public access TV, and through the posting of notices in public places including Town Halls and libraries. Of course, we will also use the mail list that is being compiled.

The Commissioners decided to hold 5 public hearings at various places around the State. These will include:

- 1. Lincoln - CCRI – June 4th at 6:30 P.M.***
- 2. Providence – TBD – June 18th at 6:30 P.M.***

- 3. Acquidneck Island – TBD – July 9th at 6:30 P.M.***
- 4. South County – TBD – July 23rd at 6:30 P.M.***
- 5. Providence – TBD – August 6th at 6:30 P.M.***

In addition the Commission will hold a workshop session prior to the June 4th public hearing and one following each public hearing as follows:

- 1. Workshop – State House, Room to be determined – Tuesday May 29th at 1:00 P.M.***

*** Please Post these dates in your calendars.**