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ELECTION LAWS

Sweeping election changes are on track

Lawmakers have been moving swiftly on a number of proposals to incorporate power over Florida election laws in the hands of state government.

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TALLAHASSEE - Despite ongoing grumbling from some counties' election officials, Florida lawmakers are moving ahead with dramatic proposals to place more control over elections into the hands of state officials.

The Republican-controlled Legislature also is moving ahead this session with a lengthy list of election changes, including one measure that critics say would silence anyone who disagrees with how the state carries out election laws.

In an effort to defuse some of the criticism, Gov. Jeb Bush and top officials in the Department of State have backed away from a February proposal that would have allowed the state to fine county election supervisors who refused to go along with "binding directives" issued by the secretary of state, who is appointed by the governor.

The state sought the authority after some local supervisors, including Broward Supervisor Brenda Snipes, refused to comply with Secretary of State Glenda Hood's recommendations on whether to accept incomplete voter registration forms. Many supervisors last year also balked at removing from the rolls voters whose names were on a list of felons that the state said should be barred from voting. The state later dropped the list after news reports pointed out it was flawed.

Instead, state officials are seeking the power to have the secretary of state issue a binding "statement of interpretation" if there is a dispute over election laws. Local supervisors of elections who object to the order can eventually ask a state appeals court to overturn the decision.

Dawn Roberts, director of the Florida Division of Elections, said the state agreed to drop the idea of fining supervisors in an effort to reach a compromise with elected supervisors. State officials say, however, that they need a way to ensure that election laws are carried out uniformly across the state.

NOT NECESSARY?

Bill Cowles, Orange County election supervisor and president of the statewide association of supervisors, said Wednesday that many members of his group still question the state's move to gain authority over local elected officials.

"We don't see the need for it," Cowles said.

The idea of giving more power to the state is included in a must-pass bill that spells out how Florida will comply with federal election regulations and the creation of a new statewide voter registration database.

The bill, which is moving smoothly through House and Senate committees, does not include another controversial provision that would have placed state officials in charge of purging all ineligible voters. Instead, local elected supervisors would decide whether or not someone should be removed because the person was a convicted felon whose civil rights had not been restored by the state.

OTHER REFORMS

On Wednesday, the House Ethics and Elections Committee also passed a major bill that deals with everything from voter registration eligibility to making it illegal for parties to switch candidates in races unless the candidate dies.

The bill also would allow people to challenge a voter's eligibility even before that person tries to vote, would prohibit

anyone from soliciting a voter within 100 feet of a voting site and would move up the deadline for requesting an absentee ballot. Also included in the 132-page elections bill is a provision that would require any group to pay up to \$200,000 in legal bills if it files a lawsuit challenging an election law and loses.

Richard Perez, the general counsel for the Department of State, said the provision was needed because groups that filed election-related lawsuits last year -- which included one of the state's largest unions and the American Civil Liberties Union -- did so to ``create chaos and confusion over our electorate."

"What we want to do is provide more sanity," Perez told legislators. Perez's comments drew a sharp rebuke from representatives of the ACLU and the Miami-Dade Election Reform Coalition.

"The intent [of the legislation] is not to prevent frivolous lawsuits but to close the courthouse door," said Lida Rodriguez-Taseff, head of the Coalition.

PARTY-LINE VOTE

The committee passed the bill by a 7-3 party-line vote, but only after Rep. Ron Reagan, the chairman of the committee, shut off debate and public testimony.

Sandy Wayland, a member of the Miami-Dade Election Reform Coalition who wanted to testify about the bill, called Reagan's move "outrageous." Reagan afterward said that he and members have been discussing items in the bills for "several weeks" and that another committee was scheduled to meet in the hearing room.