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Local government leaders ask Gov. Snyder to veto SB 571

Say state shouldn't ban local governments from providing factual election information

Local government leaders from across the state today joined to ask Gov. Rick Snyder to veto Senate Bill 571, which would gag local officials seeking to provide constituents with factual information on election matters 60 days before the election.

City, township, county, school and other officials said that constituents need to have the facts to become informed voters on key matters that come before them, including local millage issues, charter changes, land transfers and other issues required by state law to go to local elections.

SB 571 includes provisions banning local officials or employees of local governments from using public funds for a communication 60 days before an election “by means of radio, television, mass mailing or prerecorded telephone message if that communication references a local ballot question...”

“In other words, in the weeks before an election we cannot use a mailing or local cable outlets to inform our constituents if a measure will raise or lower their tax rate, who it will affect, if it will mean the community will be selling a piece of property and where it is, how a charter change will affect them or anything else,” said Dearborn Mayor Jack O’Reilly, president of the Michigan Municipal League.

“State law already prohibits electioneering using public resources, and rightly so,” O’Reilly said. “But voters need to have facts – and in too many cases, there is no other source than local governments. Gov. Snyder should veto this bill, and then ask the Legislature to hold hearings to determine if there is a real issue here and if so, how best to address it in a more limited fashion.”

Chris Barnett, supervisor of Orion Township in Oakland County, noted that this year the township plans to combine two fire millages, to help lower election costs. “If SB 571 is enacted, we cannot communicate to our voters that we are seeking to save money by combining these two issues. We cannot rely solely on our local media to cover this important taxpayer issue. Voters could be in the dark unless the township provides information explaining why we are taking this action and how it will impact their taxes.”

Terry Jungel, executive director of the Michigan Sheriffs Association, said that law enforcement in rural and metropolitan Michigan relies on local funding often provided by special millage. “Public safety millages can range from a small increase for road patrol in a township to a substantial increase to build a new jail to meet modern requirements,” Jungel said. “Voters need to get factual information on where the money will go and what they will be getting for

their additional tax dollars – or the consequences of not approving a millage. Then they can cast an informed vote.”

“State law requires local elections on a wide variety of issues, from library millages to land sales, charter amendments to police and fire enhancements. Factual information is vital if we want informed voters,” said Judy Karandjeff, president of the League of Women Voters of Michigan. “If local governments don’t provide this information who will? We see newspapers cutting back coverage, and radio and television stations reducing staff. Voters trust their local officials to give them the facts. Gov. Snyder should too, and should veto this bill.”

Others speaking at the news conference were Commissioner Matt Bierlein of Tuscola County, Rochester Mayor Bryan Barnett, Lansing School District Superintendent Yvonne Caamal Canul and Kalamazoo Public Schools Superintendent Michael Rice.

Others who have asked for a veto include the Michigan Association of School Boards, County Road Association of Michigan, Michigan Infrastructure and Transportation Association and the Michigan Association of School Administrators.