

Registering concerns

Officials fight for local control over voter lists

BY TIM RICHARD STAFF WRITER

A year later, Michigan is feeling the fallout from Congress' 1993 National Voter Registration Act — a law that will change forever how local clerks list voters.

"We have concerns. We'd like to see a feasibility study first. We haven't seen any cost numbers," Terri Land, Kent County clerk, told the House Local Government Committee Tuesday as it studied implementation of NVRA.

NVRA's purpose is to increase the proportion of Americans — particularly low-income people leaning Democratic — who are registered to vote from 75 or 80 percent to more than 90 percent.

Michigan is likely to see these two major changes:

- Voter registration soon must be done at social services, public

health, mental health, public assistance, unemployment compensation and other human services offices designated by the governor. Historically, city and township clerks — and beginning about 10 years ago, the Secretary of State driver's license offices — have registered voters.

- Clerks won't weed out "dead-wood" — voters who have been inactive for several years. "Under NVRA, clerks can't cancel because you don't vote. It's a forever file," said Rep. Robert Brackridge, R-St. Joseph, a former county clerk who co-chairs the House Local Government Committee.

"We did not support the federal 'motor voter' bill when it passed, but that's a done deal," said Gene Thornton, lobbyist for the Mich-

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*Terri Land
Kent County clerk*

igan Townships Association. "We've not heard any concern about local control," Thornton said. MTA supports a bipartisan package of bills to implement NVRA.

Kent County's Land said county and local clerks should have final maintenance authority over voter lists. "Death certificates are filed with county clerks. We can eliminate dead people immediately — within 48 hours," she said.

Brackridge liked that idea. Christopher Thomas, state

census. State computers will forward that data to local clerks.

"The technology is faster than the Postal Service," said Thomas. "There will be substantial savings to local government." No longer will local clerks have to handle volumes of paper by sending cancellation notices to voters who have been inactive for several years.

NVRA was a bitterly partisan issue in Congress. In 1992 President George Bush vetoed the first version as "a partisan sham." With Bill Clinton in the White House, Congress re-passed it in 1993.

A Republican minority in the Congress charged Democrats made it partisan by refusing to require states to designate "public libraries, public schools, clerks' offices, marriage license bureaus, revenue offices and post offices"

as voter registration places. The GOP said Democrats' designation of welfare offices "is designed to encourage fraud-prone election-day registration."

Congressional Republicans also objected there was too little federal money to support the federally mandated work. "The bill limits the state's ability to confirm independently the information contained in voter registration applications and severely restricts the state's ability to remove ineligible voters from the polls," the GOP added.

House minority leader Bob Michel, R-Ill., charged Democrats rejected Republican amendments to weed out inactive voters even once in 100 years.

Refer to House Bills 5629 through 5632 when writing your state representative, State Capitol, Lansing 48909.

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