

# State of Wisconsin \ Elections Board

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*City of Milwaukee Common Council  
Steering and Rules Committee  
Thursday, November 29, 2007, 1:30 p.m.*

*Remarks of Kevin J. Kennedy, Legal Counsel  
Wisconsin Government Accountability Board*

***Regarding Election Preparedness in the City of Milwaukee  
and the Statewide Voter Registration System***

Mayor Barrett, Chairman Hines, Vice Chairman Murphy, committee members, Election Commission members, Director Edman and staff, thank you all for inviting me to Milwaukee to discuss election preparedness as we approach the 2008 Spring Primary Election. I have some brief remarks, and then I will answer your questions.

I believe we all share a common goal: To ensure that the City of Milwaukee carries out trouble-free and transparent elections on February 19<sup>th</sup> of next year, and into the future. To do so, we must provide the public with well-trained personnel – in the form of State Elections Division staff, Milwaukee Election Commission staff, chief election inspectors and poll workers – and with a fully functioning voter registration and election administration system.

The Statewide Voter Registration System, or SVRS, has been a focus of concern for Elections Commission staff in the past year and half. The SVRS is a centralized voter database which is designed to meet state and federal requirements inspired by the Help America Vote Act (HAVA) of 2002. Wisconsin has conducted four statewide elections on the system, including the race for Governor in November 2006. The SVRS provides Wisconsin with flexibility and accountability; it allows local election officials to maintain and update one record per voter, avoiding duplication and potential confusion. While it is still a work in progress, it is also designed to provide election management capabilities previously not available to many clerks across the state.

You have asked me to address five points, and I will do so now.

On the issue of complexity and slowness of system, I know that it is not always easy to adapt to change and to learning a new system. Wisconsin election officials have had to do more adapting than those in many other states. But the SVRS is a result of a federal mandate, and the Milwaukee Election Commission staff participated in its creation by contributing to the request for proposals (RFP) that established the system's business requirements. Much of the complexity of the SVRS stems from those HAVA-inspired state and federal requirements and a list of needs incorporated at the express request of municipal election officials in more than 300 cities, villages and towns in our state.

The speed of the system has improved greatly since its launch, and as more fixes are made to the software, and election officials learn to use it with more confidence, we expect that improvement to continue. It is *not* Milwaukee's old system – that is not coming back – but it's a system that serves Milwaukee well.

Regarding the verification of newly registered voter addresses, it is important to understand that the function of address ranges in SVRS is dependent on the quality of data put into the system by any particular municipality.

First, it is the responsibility of the municipality to maintain the address ranges within SVRS as changes are made. More importantly, it is imperative that the individual entering address information selects the correct address range from the options provided by SVRS. The municipality determines what are or are not valid addresses within any range.

On the issue of data interfaces with the departments of Transportation, Health & Family Services, and Corrections, progress has not proceeded with the speed we had hoped. However, we are now close to being able to use the DOT interface to cross-check driver's license numbers, and continue to push the vendor to correct problems with the other interfaces so that lists of deceased voters and active felons can be more easily cross-checked in the SVRS. When those corrections come, our staff will offer training to the Elections Commission staff as soon as the interfaces can be made available to local election officials for normal use.

Regarding absentee voting, absentee voter applications were initially a drag on efficiency for Milwaukee, but the Elections Board has made substantial progress toward improving that function. Absentee voters can now be sorted by ward, as the City had requested, and the speed of data entry has increased. Our staff recently was able to enter Milwaukee absentee applications in 22 seconds using set defaults and in 40 seconds with no defaults set. Therefore, we do not believe any potential backlog of absentee ballot applications can be attributed to the SVRS now. More importantly, this absentee portion of the SVRS will serve Milwaukee much more efficiently than what the City relied upon in the past to serve and keep track of absentee voters. Many municipalities, including Madison, Janesville, Appleton, Wauwatosa and Fond du Lac, will be using the SVRS absentee function for spring elections.

On the issue of SVRS reports, while the reporting function of the SVRS is still not complete, the ability of Milwaukee to provide the public with voter system data has not been hindered. The reports are coming out of the system to serve Milwaukee residents. Indeed, I have been told that Alderman D'Amato has worked with Elections Board staff to get such reports for himself. In addition, the new statewide price for voter data reports allows the City to charge more than it previously charged for such reports.

The State Elections Board has committed a considerable amount of state resources to the City of Milwaukee during this process. From the summer of 2006 through the April 2007 election, we had two full-time staff members located in Milwaukee and working with Election Commission staff. Since April 2007 we have maintained one full-time Elections Board staffer in your office. Our dedication to helping Milwaukee is clear. These staff members have trained city staff, helped clean up the city's data and provided guidance for quality control and management of staff using the new system. We also have included the Commission in discussion of election administration issues, met regularly with Commission staff and invited its employees to help test the system.

The SVRS does not inhibit Milwaukee's capacity to manage data. It is clearly a step up from what many municipalities in the state were using, despite all of its "bells and whistles" not yet working. We will continue to work with Commission staff to establish procedures for full and efficient use of the SVRS.

Finally, I also do not believe the SVRS reduces the public's confidence in elections. Let's focus on what you have. Milwaukee now has a more comprehensive system of voter registration than it has ever had, and the City has access to cleaner voter data than at any time in recent history. In addition, the SVRS has been used to identify cases of double voting in the City of Milwaukee and the City of Brookfield as well as Wauwatosa and West Allis, and has identified felons who voted in other communities in the state.

Thank you again for allowing me to speak to you directly.