

# WISCONSIN ELECTIONS COMMISSION

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**DATE:** February 28, 2017

**TO:** Wisconsin County Clerks  
Milwaukee County Election Commission  
Wisconsin Municipal Clerks  
Milwaukee City Election Commission

**FROM:** Michael Haas  
Interim Administrator

**SUBJECT:** WEC 2017-19 Budget Proposal

As you may be aware, on February 8, 2017, Governor Walker issued his proposed state budget for fiscal years 2018 and 2019, which runs from July 1, 2017 to June 30, 2019. This memorandum describes the proposed budget for the Wisconsin Elections Commission (WEC), which will be discussed further at a special meeting of the WEC on March 8, 2017.

## Background – Federal Funds and Proposed Budget

Federal funds from the Help America Vote Act of 2002 (HAVA) currently fund 22.0 of the WEC's 31.75 positions. However, the HAVA funds will be depleted by the beginning of the second year of the biennium, i.e., shortly after July 1, 2018. The HAVA funds currently support the WEC's IT infrastructure and applications, the IT contractors who develop and maintain those systems, and much of the agency's program staff who perform election duties at the State level and assist local election officials in their duties.

In its budget request, the WEC sought to maintain funding for the 22 HAVA-funded positions by replacing the HAVA funds with state tax funds (General Purpose Revenue or GPR). The Governor proposed using GPR to fund 16 of the 22 current HAVA-funded positions. The Governor's proposed budget goes a significant way towards providing the long-term resources needed to administer clean and fair elections and complete the increasing tasks assigned to the WEC under state and federal laws. The GPR funding included in the Governor's proposed budget will establish a more permanent and stable foundation for the agency's staffing and program responsibilities. It fully replaces federal funds necessary for the agency's IT contractors, software assurance licenses for WisVote, and the costs of the four-year voter maintenance and polling place accessibility audit programs.

However, in authorizing the transfer of 16 of the federally funded positions to GPR funding, the proposed budget would reduce the agency's staff by six positions. Combined with the loss of four positions in the current biennium, this would represent a reduction of almost 30 percent in

elections agency staff since 2015, a reduction that would make it difficult for WEC to complete all of its responsibilities in a timely and effective manner.

Other states are also dealing with the end of their HAVA funding, but few states have relied so heavily on federal funds for its staff positions. This is largely due to Wisconsin's unique system which relies on both 72 county clerks and more than 1,850 municipal clerks to conduct elections, as opposed to most states which conduct elections only at the county level.

### Staff Responsibilities and Initiatives

As you know, WEC staff has numerous responsibilities related to the administration of elections and WisVote, the statewide voter registration system. WEC is specifically required under federal and state laws to complete certain tasks, including developing and maintaining the statewide voter registration system, training and assisting local election officials, providing voter education and outreach, testing and approving electronic voting systems, ensuring accessibility of polling places, and certifying both candidates for ballot access as well as election results. WEC is also responsible for collecting and reporting voter and election data as well as providing periodic reports of its efforts to the Legislature and federal agencies.

In recent years Congress and the Legislature have added more, not less, to the responsibilities of the agency. These include Photo ID implementation, stricter requirements for serving military and overseas voters, administrative rule promulgation, online voter registration, complaint resolution, participation in the Electronic Registration Information Center (ERIC), and the development of electronic poll books, to cite only a sampling of tasks. These responsibilities are constant and complex, and require a high degree of knowledge, judgment and communication skills.

Every statutory task and initiative of WEC ultimately serves and assists Wisconsin voters, local election officials, candidates, and elected officials. A reduction in six staff positions, on the heels of the recent reduction in four positions, would have immediate and cumulative effects on WEC operations and the ability of our newly-created agency to succeed in its mission. It may require the agency to make decisions, in consultation with the Legislature, about which statutory obligations cannot be completed or must be reduced or delayed. I would expect the elimination of the additional six staff positions to make it impossible to maintain our traditional and expected level of services.

The elimination of the additional six staff positions will have significant impacts on critical services of the agency, including but not limited to:

- Delays in and reduced ability to complete tasks such as reviewing nomination papers, assist candidates and challengers, certify candidates, and review and approve ballot formats.
- Less capacity to implement legislative changes and initiatives in a timely and consistent manner statewide, resulting in less effective training and ongoing support for local election officials and increased risk of errors at the local level.

- Decreased ability to maintain and develop WisVote, including changes of municipal boundaries and completing various list maintenance processes (to detect ineligible felons, deceased voters, double voters, and other ineligible voters), and to provide training and ongoing assistance to local election officials, creating a greater likelihood of outdated and inaccurate poll lists for municipalities which are not prepared to conduct smooth elections.
- Less accuracy and efficiency in completing numerous agency tasks which require several team members, such as testing new functions in WisVote, reviewing and certifying election results and other data provided by local election officials, testing and auditing voting equipment, and compiling local election data into required federal and state reports.

### Opportunities for Comment

The opinions of local election officials are always important for both WEC and the Legislature to consider. The next step in the budget process is for the Joint Committee on Finance, with the input of individual legislators, to review the Governor's proposed budget and to consider any changes to the budget. Under state law the biennial budget is to be enacted by June 30, and in the near future, the Committee will begin to hold hearings and votes related to each state agency's budget.

The Elections Commission has scheduled a special meeting at 11:00 a.m. on March 8, 2016 at the Commission's offices to discuss the Governor's proposed budget and to provide staff with direction regarding budget deliberations. This will be scheduled as a teleconference, although we expect some Commission members to attend in person, and there will be an opportunity for public comments. We invite local election officials to provide their comments either in writing or in person. Written comments may be provided in advance to [elections@wi.gov](mailto:elections@wi.gov). In order to distribute written comments to Commission members who will appear by telephone before the meeting, it would be helpful to receive them by March 3, 2017.

As local election officials, you may also contact your own state legislators regarding your views about the Elections Commission budget and the effect of any staff reduction on your operations and ability to properly conduct elections, as well as any other legislative issue.

Thank you for your attention to this matter and for any comment you wish to provide. Please feel free to contact me at 608-266-0136 or [Michael.haas@wi.gov](mailto:Michael.haas@wi.gov) if you have any questions regarding the agency's proposed budget or the budget process.