

Election law rewrite misses long line woes

Some members of the House committee say not enough time was given for debate on all topics.

By STEVE BOUSQUET, Times Staff Writer
Published April 7, 2005

TALLAHASSEE - A legislative rewrite of state election laws became heated Wednesday as a House committee closed off debate and testimony and passed a bill that won't fix the problem of long lines at early voting sites.

The House Ethics & Elections Committee raced through a 132-page bill covering most aspects of voting, such as absentee ballots, provisional ballots and campaigning at polling places on Election Day. The bill mirrors proposals by Secretary of State Glenda Hood, the state's top elections official.

The measure drew criticism because it failed to address a major problem in the 2004 election: long lines at early voting sites. Despite pleas from election supervisors across the state, the bill does not allow them to add early voting centers beyond those at branch offices, city halls and libraries.

"If we are able to have more flexibility, then that's really what we could do to best serve our voters," Citrus County Elections Supervisor Susan Gill told lawmakers.

The Legislature approved early voting for the first time in 2004, but what was billed as a convenience became a disaster in some areas as voters sweltered in the heat for hours waiting to cast ballots.

"We will get it right at some point in time," said Rep. Ron Reagan, R-Bradenton, the panel's chairman. "We do have another year to get it right."

Afterward, Reagan said he ran out of time to get public input about what is the biggest piece of election legislation this year.

Members of the Miami-Dade Election Reform Coalition traveled from Miami to testify, but only one member was allowed to speak.

"This bill is full of issues that should have been openly debated and discussed. This was outrageous," said coalition member Sandy Wayland.

The committee passed the bill on an 8-3 party line vote, with Republicans voting for it and Democrats against. The bill (HB 1567) still must be considered by two more House committees before reaching the House floor.

Among other things, the bill:

Expands the no-politicking zone outside a voting place from 50 feet to 100 feet.

Requires election supervisors to post on their Web sites the number of absentee ballots requested, mailed, returned and rejected. The numbers must be broken down by party affiliation and updated daily.

Requires groups that collect voter registration forms to register with the state. Such groups would be required to submit completed forms to elections offices within 10 days or face fines of \$250 per application.

Gives Hood authority to hire companies to run voter education programs without seeking bids.

Seeks to limit lawsuits challenging any election-law provision by forcing the losing side to pay the winning side's attorney's fees.

Howard Simon of the American Civil Liberties Union said the loser-pays provision would "close the courthouse door" to anyone hoping to challenge an election law. Supporters said the provision is needed to prevent lawsuits just before Election Day.

The failure to give election supervisors more flexibility in early voting fell victim to a disagreement over where the sites would be located.

Hood's office suggested expanding voting sites by using district boundaries of county commissioners. But Orange County Elections Supervisor Bill Cowles said that idea proved unworkable because such district vary from county to county.

Democrats protested when the Republican majority abruptly cut off debate after a few minutes.

"A lot of provisions in here have not been questioned," said Rep. Susan Bucher, D-West Palm Beach. "Here we sit, with no opportunity to participate in the system."

Bucher voted against the bill along with Reps. Anne Gannon, D-Delray Beach, and Tim Ryan, D-Dania Beach. All eight Republicans voted for it.

[Last modified April 7, 2005, 01:22:13]