



ONE SEALASKA PLAZA, SUITE 200 • JUNEAU, ALASKA 99801
TEL (907) 586-1325 • FAX (907) 463-5480 • WWW.AKML.ORG

Member of the National League of Cities and the National Association of Counties

The Honorable Mike Shower
Chair, Senate State Affairs
Alaska State Legislature

February 2, 2021

RE: SB 39

Senator Shower,

As you know, the Alaska Municipal League (AML) has an important role in describing the impact of proposed legislation to our diverse membership of 164 cities and boroughs. One of the principles that unites the membership is local control – the ability for local decision-making to occur in order to respond to the different circumstances that local governments work within. Where there is capacity and where local systems are working well, local control is crucial.

Local governments are responsible for carrying out annual local elections – governed by Title 29 and local charters or ordinances – and often share the responsibility to support the State in its general elections. The costs of local elections are borne by local governments, and their support of general elections undercompensated. Ultimately, it is thanks to local governments officials and in particular municipal clerks that Alaska’s elections function as well as they do. We can be proud of the safety and efficiency of this system.

We appreciate your commitment to election integrity but would suggest an amendment that removes the preemption of local decision-making. Specifically, AML requests that SB39 be amended by striking Section 22. Section 22 runs counter to the interests of Alaska’s communities, who have safely and effectively utilized all the tools at their disposal to maximize voter participation and ensure election security.

Ultimately, how municipalities conduct their elections should be left to local governments that have been doing so safely and securely, unless the State can demonstrate that this hasn’t been the case.

AML conducted an informal poll of members to better understand how they are currently conducting their elections. We have to say just how diverse the responses are. Ultimately, it is clear that local control of local elections ensures that they are able to work through the different circumstances they operate under. Current practice includes mail-in voting, mail-in voting by request (absentee), faxed ballots, email correspondence and support. There is clearly a strong culture of local governments ensuring the safety and integrity of these elections, even as at a community level, local governments are working closely within the community to address the needs of community members. It’s very manageable, seemingly, when we’re looking at that scale.

SB39, as you've noted, opens up a conversation about how to improve Alaska's elections. It was also noted in the Committee's introduction an interest in setting a baseline for local elections. On the latter, we would argue that a baseline is not established by limiting just one component of a complex system.

In fact, we would ask the Legislature to consider as a baseline, and an improvement in Alaska's elections, investments that correspond to the requirements of their administration. The State can bolster this process at the local level through increased investment in local elections. State support could come in the form of new or updated equipment, supplies, training, public education, or staff.

On this front, for many communities, it is Community Assistance that provides the basic capacity for many local governments to administer elections and comply with other State requirements. Community Assistance was reduced by 50% just six years ago, by another third last year, and potentially by another third this coming fiscal year. We know based on past experience that when Community Assistance declines at this scale, some number of local governments are forced to cease operations.

At the same time, we encourage the State to adequately fund local government staff who are engaged in supporting the State's own election processes. Instead of an hourly reimbursement of time to municipal staff who often volunteer their time to assist with State elections, we recommend a contractual arrangement or simple add-on to Community Assistance for municipalities who agree to support the State in its administration.

Senator, there are clearly investments the State can make in ensuring that local governments have the tools necessary to support safe and effective local elections, and to assist the State as necessary. AML encourages you to consider these alternatives, even as we ask again that you remove Section 22 from the bill.

Thank you for your attention to this matter and we look forward to working with your office to advance these issues.

Respectfully,



Nils Andreassen
Executive Director

Copy:

- Senate President Peter Micciche
- Lieutenant Governor Kevin Meyer