

Voters will decide on election commission

■ Authority would shift to 3-member panel

By MATT STENSLAND
News-Gazette Staff Writer

URBANA — Champaign County Board member Robert Kirchner, an Urbana Democrat, says the county board should have created an election commission to oversee elections when it had the chance.

"When people vote in this county, they should be able to walk away and say 'I don't like the results, but I know it was done fairly,'" Kirchner said. When it came to a vote at a

board meeting in August 2003, several Democrats disagreed, saying such a change should be decided by voters, not the county board. The board voted 14-13 against creating a commission. The county board then voted 21-6 in support of the concept of a referendum to decide whether a bipartisan election commission should be formed that would essentially strip election duties away from the county clerk's office.

Republican Champaign County Clerk Mark Sheldon also thought the question should be put to voters and helped collect signatures to get the question on the ballot. Two members of the majori-

Ballot question

The question: Shall a Board of Election Commissioners be established for Champaign County?

Background: The Champaign County Board raised, then rejected, the establishment of an election commission to handle election duties in the county. The county clerk's office now is in charge of election duties. Eight cities in Illinois have appointed to the commission.

ty party, currently Democrats, and one member of the minority party would be appointed to the election commission by the county board chairman. Illinois law would allow Sheldon to join the commission as his party's representative. Currently, eight cities in Illinois have election commissions, and the only

countywide commission is in DuPage.

Democrats accuse Sheldon of being too political and say it is unfair to have him overseeing elections. It has been impossible to hold Sheldon accountable, Kirchner said, and creating a commission would prohibit Sheldon from making "back-room decisions that no one knows about."

Democrats point to a recent discovery that Sheldon used a county fax machine to transmit an order for a political advertisement buy to a radio company. Sheldon apologized and said he is usually careful about separating politics and county clerk duties.

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"The county clerks have all been Republican, and the people who have had trouble voting have been Democrats," said county board member Steven Beckett, a veteran Urbana attorney who was one of three Democrats who voted against creating the commission.

A countywide commission would still be partisan, critics say, because the three-member commission would be appointed

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Panel

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by the county board, which currently has a Democrat majority. The commission would appoint an executive director.

"There is not much change from a county clerk running elections to a county board running elections," said Barbara Young, executive director for the Danville Election Commission. "All that it amounts to is a change of control in the machinery."

Danville has a municipal commission in charge of elections within the city limits. Unlike a countywide election board, its commissioners are appointed by a judge and the commission is independent of the county board.

"When I was sworn in, the judge said I would be gone the next day if I screwed up an election," said Young, a supporter of municipal election commissions. "A city commission is probably more accountable."

"There is a greater chance that it would be more bipartisan than just with the county clerk," Beckett said.

The costs associated with creating an election commission have also been disputed.

Democrats say money could be saved by creating the commission.

"The money to pay for an election commission always

exists in the county board and county clerk's budgets," said Kirchner, who is not running for re-election.

A spring 2004 referendum in Peoria asked voters if their election commission should be eliminated, putting county and city election duties under the county clerk. It was seen as being a cost-saving measure, election commissioner Jeanette Mitzelfelt said, but a study by the city finance office found the election commission spent less money. The 2004 referendum was the third failed attempt to dismantle the commission.

Even if it did not cost more to establish a commission, Sheldon said, he would still be against it.

"Right now I am in the spotlight," said Sheldon, who takes pride in the creation of a pre-election voter guide, electronic voter kiosks and what he thinks is the best county clerk Web site in Illinois. "People can come to me, they can call me, they can voice their complaints. They see me on TV and the radio, they hear me on the news, they have direct contact, and they can vote me in or out."

Sheldon said the election commission could cost \$300,000 annually. This is a conservative estimate, and it is more efficient to run elections through the county clerk's office with existing staff, Sheldon said. Sheldon also noted the salaries

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for an executive director and assistant could exceed \$100,000.

Democrats "made accusations against me that make it pretty apparent that this is about me and not trying to run elections better," Sheldon said. "It's about them trying to take the power away from me and put it with them in a blatantly political partisan move."

"My fear has always been that this would be put on the ballot as a partisan issue and (Sheldon) hasn't disappointed me," Beckett said.

You can reach Matt Stensland at (217) 351-5211 or via e-mail at mstensla@news-gazette.com.