

Testimony of Jim Storey
Chair, Allegan County Board of Commissioners
House Local Government & Municipal Finance Committee
October 27, 2021

RE: Senate Bills 242 and 245

Chairwoman Calley and Members of the Committee:

Good afternoon and thank you for permitting me to address the committee on the bills offered by Senators McBroom and Moss that will, if enacted, fundamentally improve the ability of county governments to address the numerous duties and responsibilities entailed in serving our Michigan people.

Chairwoman Calley, as a former county commissioner and Board chair, you are familiar with the many functions and services county governments are expected and honored to render. In addition to providing front line public safety and protection, the list includes food service establishment inspections, STD prevention and testing, running the public defender program, emergency management functions, providing facilities for the efficient functioning of courts and corrections agencies, among many more.

Today, as I converse with you, a new, massive duty has been added, counties are setting up and conducting testing and vaccination clinics for their residents . . . thousands of them. As a result, county boards across the state are wrestling with devoting the time and attention to overseeing the delivery of these functions.

These tasks and the many assigned by previous legislatures has made the job of county commissioner deeper and more important than ever before. Nor are these tasks simple one-offs. The ones enumerated require long range planning and attention to detail over several years to be successful and cost-efficient.

In short, county commissioners are responsible for overseeing county governments whose job is service delivery, every day of every week of every month of every year. Being

distracted from this service delivery, not legislative, function by short elected terms disservices the residents we share.

This need to allow elected county leaders the time to develop a longer-range vision is not a new realization. 60 years ago this year, the people of Michigan called a constitutional convention. During those deliberations, the con-con delegates heard the pleas for a constitution that recognized the dramatic change in demands on county government.

From the Wayne County Board of Supervisors, Edward Purdy, discussing county home rule charters, told Con-Con's local government committee on December 13, 1961,

"For 20 years, we in Wayne County have tried to keep pace with technical and social changes. . . we have found there is little a county can do by itself to effect necessary changes in organizational structure because present laws specifically detail and limit methods for performing each function. . . . Perhaps the failures of the past to obtain a flexible type of county government have been caused by fear –fear by those in government that a new procedure would adversely affect their individual interest."

Oakland County's representatives shared similar frustrations with the con-con local government committee delegates. Oakland Board of Supervisors members Hamlin, Seamann and Barnard summarized the problem this way:

"Counties are sort of headless types of governments. Demands upon these counties have increased without adequate provisions to meet these demands."

To their credit, the Constitutional Convention delegates responded. In the document, they sent to voters in 1963, the terms of the Boards of Supervisors as well as the sheriff, county prosecuting attorney, clerk, treasurer and drain commissioner were all increased from two to four year terms.

As we know now, in April 1963 Michigan voters approved of this change as well as a number of other modernizing elements.

This response provided by con-con delegates for a modern organization to respond to modern issues was short lived, though. When it abolished the Boards of County Supervisors in 1966 and created County Boards of Commissioners in their stead, the Legislature went backwards and set Commissioners' terms at two years. The terms of the county officers were left unchanged at four year terms, being, as they are, protected by the constitution.

What the people of Michigan granted their county representative body members at the ballot box, the Legislature of 1966 had the temerity to take away.

It's time to correct this short-sighted and, in the words of Wayne County's Ed Purdy from 60 years ago, "fearful act", by giving back county commissioners terms long enough to craft the best service delivery solutions to today's modern issues. It's time to restore their four year terms.

It's also time for Michigan to join the other 45 States that have already invested in modernizing county government by providing four year terms for their state's county commissioners.

Thank you again for your time today. I appreciate the committee taking up the consideration of these important bills to improve the operation of county government. Please send them forward to the full House.