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Fiscal, Policy Discussions During Budget Debate Produces Mixed Bag for Voting Rights Advocates

HARRISBURG (July 8, 2022) --- The final days of political gamesmanship that usually accompanies the annual budget-making process produced a mixed bag for election reform advocates.

While counties secured more money to administer elections as part of a larger budget deal, policies that would make it harder to vote, especially for communities of color, and allow partisan election audits advanced as part of a constitutional amendment process.

Counties will receive \$45 million over the next year to help pay for election-related costs under legislation (S.B. 982) that moved in conjunction with the final 2022-23 General Fund budget bill (S.B. 1100). There are limitations on how the money can be used. The measure also would ban the use of third-party money for election administration over the same period.

Both measures were passed by the General Assembly and sent to the governor.

“I hope we have finally broken the cycle where politicians say they want to ensure safe, secure, efficient elections, but then grossly underfund the local offices that have to administer our primary and general elections,” said Patty Torres, Organizing Director of Make the Road PA. “Our local election offices have been doing more with less in recent years, so this infusion of funding is critical.”

Keystone Votes, one of the state’s leading and most respected voices when it comes to modernizing Pennsylvania’s election process, has long been calling for the state to provide more resources for county election operations as part of its platform.

Another measure (S.B. 106) that advanced includes several constitutional amendments, including one that would require voters to show ID at polling places and another to create a system for election audits under the state Office of Auditor General.

“The House and Senate have worked tirelessly to advance measures that intentionally make it harder for our communities to vote, including proposed constitutional amendments that

undermine the will of the people,” said Deidre Lesesne, Development Coordinator for the Voter Empowerment, Education & Enrichment Movement (VEEEM).

“Even if proposed constitutional amendments might not change the way we vote, they inconvenience people in our community who we should be helping by making it easier to vote, including senior citizens, single parents, students, and others,” Lesesne said. “These partisan policies do nothing to solve voters’ anxieties about not having the time to vote, standing in line for hours, or ensuring mail-in ballots are received and counted.”

The push for additional audits is fueled by unfounded allegations of mail-in fraud in the 2020 general election, even though multiple independent post-election reviews and dozens of bipartisan judges verified the outcome.

The measure passed the General Assembly; it requires no further action this session.

The governor cannot veto a constitutional amendment. The proposed constitutional amendments still need to pass again in the next legislative session, which begins in January 2023, before it can go before voters. The earliest it could appear on the ballot is in the primary election in May 2023.

Both Make the Road PA and VEEEM are members of the nonpartisan Keystone Votes coalition. For more information, visit <https://www.keystonevotes.org/>.

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