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Testimony before the Assembly Committee on Campaigns and Elections

Senator André Jacque

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Thank you Mr. Chairman and Members for holding this hearing on Assembly Bill 283, the Local Government Special Election Cost Relief Act.

Assembly Bill 283 applies to special elections called by the Governor to fill vacancies for the offices of State Senate and Assembly, statewide constitutional officers, state judges, and district attorneys. If the special election or special primary is consolidated with a regularly scheduled statewide election, the state would only reimburse the costs directly associated with the vacancy (a special primary or special election not consolidated with a regular election).

A Governor's call for a special election currently puts local municipalities on the hook for unreimbursed expenses for administering the special election (and special primary, if applicable) that can easily exceed a hundred thousand dollars across a single Assembly District, regardless of turnout.

That's why we are introducing the Local Government Special Election Cost Relief Act to require state reimbursement of the significant unfunded and unanticipated costs that such elections force upon local governments.

Local governments are already forced to stretch their budgets for election administration from two elections in odd-numbered years to four in even-numbered years. Under current law, special elections occur with very little control, and municipalities have to shoulder nearly all of the costs incurred. With little warning, these unexpected elections can have substantial fiscal impacts on local governments that already have limited budgets.

Under Assembly Bill 283, a cost is eligible for reimbursement only if the Wisconsin Elections Commission (WEC) determines that the cost is reasonable and the rate paid by the county or municipality for the cost does not exceed the rate customarily paid for similar costs at a primary or election that is not a special primary or election.

Among the costs covered by the bill are rental payments for polling places, election day wages paid to election officials working at the polls, costs for the publication of required election notices, printing and postage costs for absentee ballots and envelopes, data entry costs for a statewide voter registration system, and other significant election costs identified by municipal clerks in previous state surveys.

Thank you for your consideration of Assembly Bill 283. I'd be happy to answer any questions.