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SECRETARY MERRILL OUTLINES PROPOSALS TO IMPROVE ELECTION ADMINISTRATION IN CONNECTICUT, PROFESSIONALIZE OFFICE OF REGISTRAR OF VOTERS

SECRETARY OF THE STATE SEEKS TO ESTABLISH ONE REGISTRAR PER
MUNICIPALITY, LOCALLY APPOINTED PROFESSIONAL EMPLOYEE; REQUIRE
MINIMUM QUALIFICATIONS, TRAINING AND CERTIFICATION

HARTFORD: Secretary of the State Denise Merrill today proposed improving election administration in Connecticut by transforming the office of Registrar of Voters from a local elected official handpicked by town political committees to a municipal employee appointed locally to administer elections as a non-partisan professional. Under concept legislation submitted by Secretary Merrill to the General Assembly's Government Administration and elections Committee, each city and town in Connecticut would have one Registrar of Voters per municipality in charge of administering elections. That individual would be hired as a municipal employee, and would need minimum qualifications of at least a Bachelor's degree or four years' experience in election administration. The Registrar would also need to be certified and would be required to undergo yearly training administered by the state on new developments in election administration or new voting technologies. As a municipal employee the Registrar would have all the support staff necessary, and would be required to follow all state and federal election laws, as well as election directives issued by the Secretary of the State.

"The time has come to modernize and professionalize the office or Registrar of Voters in Connecticut, one that is crucial to empowering our citizens in exercising their right to vote," said Secretary Merrill, Connecticut's chief elections official. "We have now had two elections in the last four years where Connecticut has made national news for problems on Election Day, and enough is enough. Our elections system in Connecticut overall is good, and on the whole Registrars work hard and do a good job. But clearly we can do much better. How we run elections in Connecticut is too political while lacking professionalism and accountability. These legislative changes are designed to fix that and finally bring election administration in our state into the 21st century."

Connecticut is the only state in the country that leaves election administration to two partisan locally elected officials. There are no minimal qualifications for Connecticut's Registrars of Voters, who are chosen by their local town political committees. The nominee of the major parties for Registrar do not run against each other, they are each guaranteed a local position under state law, funded by municipal taxpayers. Other New England states leave election administration to the local municipal clerk, or through local bipartisan boards of election who hire professional staff to manage day-to-day operations. In fact, many states have regional or county-wide bipartisan boards of elections where elections are administered regionally by professional staff hired for their qualifications and experience.

In addition to the high-profile problems experienced in Bridgeport and Hartford that led to problems at the polls on Election Day in 2010 and 2014, there are constantly reports of dysfunctional relationships locally between Registrars of Voters of different political parties. There have been cases of verbal and physical altercations, one Registrar locking the other one out of the office, one Registrar dominating office functions while the other rarely reports to work and other troubling issues. Under current state laws, there is also very little that can be done to discipline or hold accountable a Registrar of Voters who is not doing their job, not complying with state laws, or not acting in a professional manner. As local elected officials there is virtually nothing that can be done by the state or even the municipality to require participation with new technological improvements to modernize how elections are conducted, how results are reported, and how vote counts are audited, for instance. As municipal employees, this type of compliance with state and federal laws and fluency with new technologies would be a requirement of the job.

Legislative concepts submitted by Secretary Merrill to the GAE committee related to strengthening election administration will be contained in a bill to be heard at a public hearing on Monday March 9, 2015.