



PENNSYLVANIANS
FOR MODERN COURTS

PRESS RELEASE

Contact: Jeanette Krebs
Phone: 717-214-2200
Email: Krebs@thebravogroup.com

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PUSH FOR MERIT SELECTION MAKES SIGNIFICANT GAINS IN STATE *List Of Supporters Continues To Grow, As Does Call For Hearings*

PHILADELPHIA -- Pennsylvanians for Modern Courts (PMC) Executive Director Lynn Marks said today the call for merit selection is growing in the state, as more people see it as the best system for selecting appellate judges.

“We have seen an increase in support, both from organizations and from legislators, in the last six months,” said Marks. “As more people understand what merit selection is all about, they believe it is a better way to choose appellate judges.”

PMC and PMCAction, a related nonprofit that lobbies for court reform, are continuing efforts for a constitutional amendment to replace the state’s process of electing appellate judges with a merit selection system. With growing support and increased media attention, the issue is well positioned to be a top reform priority during the 2009-2010 legislative session, said Marks.

The coalition in support of merit selection has now grown to include civic, business and legal groups and prominent individuals. Among the growing list of supporters are the League of Women Voters, Common Cause, Pennsylvania Council of Churches, the Philadelphia Council of Clergy, the Pennsylvania Chamber of Commerce, the Pennsylvania Business Council, ACLU, Urban League, the Committee of 70, Pennsylvania Manufacturers Association and former judges.

In addition, a blog launched by the organization, **judgesonmerit.org**, also has been attracting a steadily growing readership.

“The current election system forces judges to seek and accept large donations from lawyers and organizations that may one day appear before them in court,” said Marks. “Not only does this create a perception of biased judgment in the courtroom, it also places an emphasis on campaign skills as opposed to legal skills and experience.”

Marks said the state’s current system is flawed for a variety of reasons, not least of which is the skyrocketing sums of money being spent in judicial races. During the 2007 Pennsylvania Supreme Court race, candidates spent a record of nearly \$8 million for two open seats.

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Proposed legislation would change the process for selecting appellate judges by creating a 14-member, nonpartisan and independent citizens-based Appellate Court Nomination Commission to screen judicial candidates and develop a list of potential nominees for the governor. Following nomination by the governor and confirmation by the state Senate, a judge would serve an initial term of four years and would then go before voters in a retention election. Voters would ultimately decide at that point, and every 10 years thereafter, whether the judge should stay on the bench.

Marks praised the legislation's prime Senate sponsor Sen. Jane Earll, R-Erie, and cosponsor, Sen. Anthony H. Williams, D-Philadelphia, and House prime sponsor Rep. David Steil, R-Bucks, and cosponsor Rep. Josh Shapiro, D-Montgomery, for their leadership. She also recognized Gov. Ed Rendell for his continued strong support of merit selection.

While it is too late to pass a constitutional amendment and satisfy the advertising requirements this session, there is still a possibility that hearings will be held in the coming months.

"This year, time, unfortunately, was not on our side," said Marks. "This was a disappointment but we are extremely encouraged by the growth in support and we're encouraged that our legislators will recognize the advantages of merit selection. We are looking forward to hearings so there can be increased public dialogue."

Pennsylvanians for Modern Courts is a statewide nonprofit, nonpartisan organization founded to improve and strengthen the justice system in Pennsylvania by reforming the judicial selection process; improving court administration, court financing and the jury system; eliminating bias; and assisting citizens in navigating the courts and the justice system, whether as litigants, jurors, or witnesses. PMCAction is a related nonprofit that lobbies for court reform initiatives.

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