Easier voter signup options urged

By STEVE CULPEPPER
Advocate staff writer

Eligible voters shouldn't be forced to stand in line to register to vote when there are easy, efficient alternatives to the current registration process, the Louisiana president of a national citizens action organization said.

Currently, 27 states use mail-in registration, and at least two others used a combined form that allows people to register to vote at the same time they apply for a driver's license, according to Louisiana Common Cause president Marcus Carson.

Carson said the need for alternative voter registration became clear during the two-day registration marathon on Oct. 21 and 22, when an estimated 65,000 people statewide endured long lines and rain to apply to become registered voters.

Louisiana Commissioner of Elections Jerry Fowler said the long lines were unprecedented and that, ordinarily, eligible voters have no trouble registering.

Carson said he sees no reason why the state can't use a mail-in registration system already in use in other states. "The fact is we do our canvassing (checking the accuracy of voters' home addresses) through the mail. And the registration system is now computerized and the commissioner of elections says there's really no chance of fraud based on multiple registration because the computer will spot them and clear them out," Carson said.

"We have a very good system," Fowler said. "I'm sure we could make improvements. We try to make it as easy as possible. Some of our laws are a little more restrictive than they are in other states."

Carson said the most popular form of alternate registration, mail-in registration, has its drawbacks. "In most states that use postcard registration, the biggest complaint is that if they send out 10 cards, when they come back only three are legible enough to read to put into the system."

Fowler said the state is already doing what it can to make registrations simple and convenient. "We have a very good system," Fowler said. "I'm sure we could make improvements. We try to make it as easy as possible. Some of our laws are a little more restrictive than they are in other states."

Fowler said the state is already doing what it can to make registrations simple and convenient. "The only purpose of registration is to guarantee the integrity of the rolls. As long as we can guarantee the integrity of the rolls, there are a whole range of ways to simplify it. Then all we have to do is make sure the voters are informed on the issues and the candidates and then get out on election day and vote."

Fowler said improvements in voter registration is an ongoing process in Louisiana.

Despite the need to go to the registrar's office to register, Carson said "The good news is that people seem willing to deal with these obstacles anyway, whether taking time off and losing pay or cutting class or paying bus fare to go downtown. The bad news is that it doesn't have to be such a hassle. We have voting machines almost within walking distance of most people in the state and yet you have to go downtown to register. The system is pretty tight. They keep up with you still live where you live and they can update automatically, so that there's no reason to keep the first-time registration process in the dark ages."

Fowler said improvements in voter registration is an "on-going process" in Louisiana.