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Judicial Election Reform Bills Aim to Preserve Independence of Judiciary

January 24, 2007 – Atlanta - Representative Edward Lindsey (R-Atlanta), Common Cause Georgia, the League of Women Voters of Georgia, Georgia Watch and several state legislators held a joint press conference on the Capitol steps Wednesday to announce the introduction of two judicial election reform bills.

House Bill 97:

- Takes party money out of non-partisan judicial races
- Forces recusal when a sitting judge has accepted more than \$500 from any of the parties in a case before them, if opposing parties insist
- Forces independent committees who weigh in on candidate races to abide by the same donation limits as those contributing to campaigns

House Bill 102:

- Establishes a voluntary public funding program for statewide judicial elections and counters the alarming trend of large campaign contributions being funneled into judicial races.

Government accountability organizations including Common Cause Georgia, the League of Women Voters, Georgia Rural Urban Summit and Georgia Watch have put their support behind these bills as much needed reform.

“We applaud Rep. Lindsey and the other sponsors for crafting these bills that address what many Georgians see as a disturbing trend,” said Bill Bozarth, Executive Director of Common Cause. **“The job of our judges is to rule fairly and impartially on the merits of the cases before them, and not to reflect the will of those who got them elected. With these laws in place, Georgians will be able to remain confident in the independence of our judiciary.”**

Jennifer Owens, executive director of the League of Women Voters of Georgia, also expressed her support. **“If we are to maintain and preserve the independence of our judiciary, a fundamental tenet in our democratic system, the increasing amount of political contributions made to judges must be addressed. Georgia citizens must be assured that the impartiality of our justice system will never be compromised by political contributions.”**

“Our courts should be a place of equal footing where a Georgia family matters just as much as a billion dollar company,” said Georgia Watch Executive Director Allison Wall. **“These bills will help accomplish that by limiting the access and influence of out of state interests in our elections.”**

Larry Pelligrini, director of the Georgia Rural Urban Summit, is pleased with the reform proposals. **“Oftentimes the best candidates for judicial office decide not to even run when they are faced with worries about campaign costs or the appearance of impropriety when a donor might come before their court.”**

Public funding for judicial campaigns has already proven successful in our sister state of North Carolina, which introduced public funding for the first time in 2004. Georgia’s new law builds on the success of North Carolina’s experience and incorporates lessons learned from public financing in other states and cities around the country.

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