The Recall Process in Michigan

Legislative History and Current Status

By Janice Selberg

he following is a sketch of the legislative and constitutional history of the recall of local officials in Michigan. Recall—the removal of a public official by popular vote—didn’t exist in its current form until the mid-twentieth century. In the Michigan Constitution of 1835 (pre-statehood), the provision for removal from local office stated, “The legislature shall provide by law for the removal of justices of the peace, and other county and township officers, in such manner and for such cause as to them shall seem just and proper.” The legislature of 1837–1838 did so by granting this power to the governor. By 1846, the process of removal of local officers was well established, with the county prosecutor charged with the task of investigation and local judges presiding over the taking of testimony, which would then be transmitted to the governor for a determination.

The 1850 Constitution made almost no change from 1835 except to remove justices of the peace and add school district officers. The 1879 statute amending the removal process required “sufficient evidence” that the local officer is incompetent on the basis of “official misconduct, or of willful neglect of duty, or of extortion, or of habitual drunkenness...or been convicted of a felony after his election.”

Further movement toward direct recall came as a result of the 1908 Constitution. The text of Section 8 reads: “Any officer elected by a county, city, village, township or school district may be removed from office in such manner and for such cause as shall be prescribed by law.” A 1913 Michigan law was one of the first in the nation to adopt removal by vote of the people. This act “to provide for the recall of certain elective officers and for the election to fill the vacancy created thereby” was the result of a failure by the legislature earlier in the 1913 legislative session to amend the constitution (adding a Section 10 to Article 12) to allow recall. Public Act 235 detailed the procedure for the first time:

- All elected officials except judges of courts of record are subject to recall.
- Elected county, township, or village officials must file petitions with the probate judge of the relevant county, and petitions for the recall of a city official must be filed with the mayor.
- Petitions must be signed by at least 25 percent of the number of electors voting in the preceding gubernatorial election.
- No petitions may be circulated against an officeholder unless he or she has been in office for three months (45 days for a legislative office).
- Special recall elections will be held within 25 days.
- Ballot language must identify the reasons for demanding a recall and contain no more than 200 words. The officer’s justification for conduct in office must be described in no more than 200 words.
- If recalled, an officer may run in the vacancy election, to be held in 30 days.
- An officer who was not successfully recalled may not be subject to recall in the same term unless the petitioners pay the public treasury all expenses incurred in the process.

Unlike later amendments to the recall provisions, the 1913 act was not part of a package of election reform; it was stand-alone legislation. The amendment of 1917 made a few slight changes to recall ballot language but left most of the provisions of 1913 unchanged, including the ability of the recalled officer to run in the vacancy election. The 1931 amendment added for the
first time a statutory form for petition language as well as detailed qualifications for petitioners and signatories. In addition, the 1931 act states, “No recalled officer shall be a candidate to fill the vacancy created by his recall.”13

The Michigan Supreme Court clarified the nature and sufficiency of petition language in 1949 and 1952 in two mandamus cases. In Amberg v Welsh,14 the Court held that the 1913 act did not require each statement in the petition to be sufficient in itself to constitute misconduct, but that all statements taken as a whole are sufficient. In Eaton v Baker,15 the Court distinguished petitions for recall from proceedings for removal, stating that the petition does not have to allege time, person, and occasion involved because “it clearly states the charge so the officer may identify the incident and prepare his justification,” as technical detailed statements impose too great a burden on laymen.16

The 1954 recall act17 marks the maturation of the issue of recall in Michigan law. The 1963 Constitution established the power:

Laws shall be enacted to provide for the recall of all elective officers except judges of courts of record upon petition of electors equal in number to 25 percent of the number of persons voting in the last preceding election for the office of governor in the electoral district of the officer sought to be recalled. The sufficiency of any statement of reasons or grounds procedurally required shall be a political rather than a judicial question.18

The current form of the 1954 act is a result of 16 amendments, including a major 2012 amendment. The secretary of state has issued recent clarification and procedural statements in aid of state and local elections officials.19

Janice Selberg is a law reference librarian with the State Law Library in Lansing. She is a member and former chairperson of the State Bar of Michigan’s Libraries, Legal Research, and Legal Publications Committee. She has been a member of the State Bar since 1985 and holds BA, AMLS, and JD degrees as well as a graduate certificate in archival administration. Her past work includes positions in academic, corporate, and foreign libraries.

ENDNOTES
5. 1879 PA 243, § 6.
7. McLaughlin v Burroughs, 90 Mich 311; 51 NW 283 (1892).
8. Id.
11. 1913 PA 235.
12. 1917 PA 44.
13. 1931 PA 114.
16. Id. at 525–526.
17. 1954 PA 116, as amended by MCL 168.951 et seq.