

PBA review commission seeks public input on state fixes

Group will meet Friday in Hermitage

By PHILLIP A. RAU
prau@recordargusnews.com

HERMITAGE — After more than a year of testimony on issues ranging from the structure of Pennsylvania's government to the way it runs public education, a group of lawyers and judges tasked with finding the problems and figuring out how to fix them will hold its final public hearing Friday in Hermitage.

The Pennsylvania Bar Association's Constitutional Review Commission will hear testimony for the final time at an expanded public hearing at Hermitage municipal building set to begin at 9:30 a.m.

The group's subcommittees on the state's judiciary, general assembly, and taxation processes had been set to hear testimony.

But after increased interest in other topics was expressed — subcommittees on legislative reapportionment, local government, and public education are also part of the committee's purview — the hearing has been opened to any of the six topics.

Sharon-based attorney Joann M. Jofery, who serves on the subcommittee examining the structure of the state's general assembly, will chair the hearing.

"It's ironic," said Jofery, adding that she's missed all of the previous hearings either because of scheduling conflicts or because of cancellations. "It's my first one and I'm running it."

A hearing scheduled for earlier this year in Erie was canceled amid weather concerns, she said, and the blog of the law journal The Legal Intelligencer reported in January that a hearing scheduled for mid-January in Pittsburgh was scrapped after PBA officials said they received thin response to calls for testimony.

Friday's hearing will be anything but thin. Half of the commission's subcommittees will be in attendance, and a third or more of its 30-member body.

"It's the final hearing," before the commission begins reviewing nearly 18 months of testimony, Jofery said. "We wanted to give everyone who expressed an interest the opportunity to speak."

Who has been speaking up, she said, are special interest groups.

"I don't know why we haven't had any private citizens," she said. "What we wanted to do as a group was give the citizens and various interest groups the opportunity for input."

Even subcommittees with popular topics to review, such as the commission's public education sub-

committee, have seen virtually no citizen testimony, she said.

After Friday's meeting, subcommittees will begin meeting and assembling reports for the commission's general body.

In September the commission will begin working on a full report, which is expected to be forwarded to the state Bar Association's House of Delegates before their annual meeting in November.

"It's too early to say," what any recommendations handed down by the report could amount to, Jofery said, or how the commission will recommend implementing them — though she added that it would be a surprise if the commission ended up recommending convening a constitutional convention.

"I don't know that we'll ever recommend a convention," she said, "(but) it's definitely something the bar will look at getting involved in."

The commission was created by the state bar association in late 2009, after public embarrassments like the "bonusgate" scandals prompted PBA officials to call down lawmakers.

"Government in the Keystone State clearly is not working for Pennsylvanians," said PBA President Clifford E. Haines, announcing the commission's charter in February of last year.

Officers from Mercer County Bar Association, which is underwriting Friday's hearing, did not re-



turn calls for comment.
Commission vice chairs
John A. Hanna, of Indiana,
Pa., and Carol A. Shelly, of
Doylestown, Pa., did not re-
turn phone messages.