

After Actions Report

LAKE COUNTY LEGISLATIVE COMMITTEE MONTANA 2023 LEGISLATIVE SESSION



Introduction

The Lake County Republican Central Committee (LCRCC) realized that if they had to specify three tasks that sum up their election-to-election functions and priorities, it would be these:

1. **Pick superb candidates** for office and get them elected;
2. **Raise the funding needed to get out the Republican message** to support our ideas, principles, and candidates; and,

3. **Provide maximum support** to our candidates—in particular to those seated in Helena **working on legislation**.

While having done a great job with the first two items, we resolved to try to do a much better job with the third during the 2023 legislative session.

What We Learned

We discovered assisting legislators is a very difficult task. Our already high level of respect for elected officials went up tremendously when we saw that even knowing what is in the blizzard of bills thrown at them in a single session requires a herculean effort. For 2025, we are hoping to apply our lessons learned and be of better use to our local elected officials.

Getting Elected is the Easy Part

As difficult a it is to campaign and get elected, that work is considerably



easier than pushing a bill through the House, Senate, and on to the Governor's desk for signature.

However, this third task of legislating is the most important of all the tasks.

Our intention with this After Actions Report (AAR) written primarily by our Legislative Committee Chairman, a recovering lawyer and former Federal Bureau of Investigation Agent, is to share with other Republican Central Committees the lessons we learned, to encourage them to get deeply involved with the legislative effort, and to open the floor to better ideas, ways, and coordination between our Central Committees during future sessions.

We hope you find our exposing of our good, bad, and ugly experiences useful.



Lake County Montana Republican Central Committee

Legislative Committee Activities

for the 2023 Montana Legislative Session

After Action Report

21 June 2023

SITUATION:

Lake County is located in Western Montana with much of its territory encompassing the Southern end of Flathead Lake. The county seat is located in Polson Montana. Lake County has a representative form of government organized pursuant to the Montana Constitution.

In February of 2021, the LCRCC decided to form a Legislative Committee (LC) that would operate under the auspices of the LCRCC. The LC is officially recognized by the LCRCC bylaws. (It should be noted that this was our very first effort at an LC and we believe we were the only one in existence in the State at the Central Committee level for the 2023 Legislative Session.)



The LC comprised approximately ten individuals. The membership varies according to the objectives the LC is attempting to achieve,

The Tiger Team is the operations arm of the LCRCC. They meet weekly and handle operations oriented issues as well as strategic planning which is then subsequently presented to the plenary of the LCRCC (the Precinct Captains) for their approval or veto.

and some individuals from the LCRCC Tiger Team (TT) augment the LC membership.

PURPOSE OF THIS DOCUMENT: This document is intended to be a review of the activities of the LC to determine what worked best in terms of achieving the goals of the LC. This report will cover the following topics:

1. Organization;
2. Meetings;
3. Topics/Focus
4. Communication with legislators
5. Effectiveness



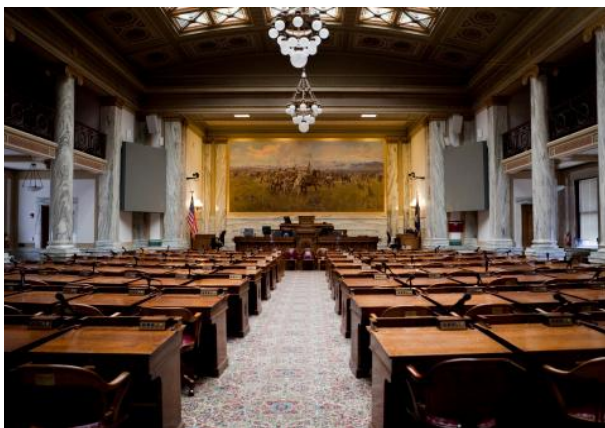
ORGANIZATION:

Issue—Organization: The LC is a loosely organized group of approximately ten conservative volunteers whose stated goal has been to assist the LCRCC by **reviewing legislation, drafting legislation, communicating with legislators about reviewed/proposed legislation** and **advocating for various pieces of legislation** among the grassroots LCRCC members. An additional duty is to voice the LCRCC and LC's opinion on various bills to the State Legislature by means of public, grassroots appearances in hopes of influencing the adoption or rejection of those bills.

Solution/Recommendation: This form of organized, interested volunteers has merit and is a way for local citizens to gain a voice in state government. Whether it should be replicated for the 2025 legislative session remains to be seen. The LC would be more effective if several suggested changes were implemented.

Issue—Grassroots Interest: One of the more difficult things to achieve was getting the necessary response from grassroots LCRCC members and conservatives. Time and time again, the LC would issue a communication asking for

grassroots members to testify in Helena, testify via online system, or call/write/email their legislators. **There was virtually no response, nor feedback from the grassroots about the LC's efforts.** The chair of the LC sent numerous emails via the LCRCC general email distribution list and **only heard back from one individual on two**



separate occasions. The LC Chair appeared at the LCRCC monthly plenary meetings and asked for volunteers on two or three occasions, but ***other than the usual volunteers, there was no response.*** While the chair cannot comment about experiences of other members, the chair found this frustrating and was left to wonder if the grassroots have any interest in the LC and, if not, ***the question becomes whether it should continue.***

Solution/Recommendation: The LC has no recommendation on this issue, unfortunately. ***This issue seems to be prevalent society wide.*** The leadership of the LCRCC has experienced the very same thing and made comments of a similar nature. ***Very few people seem to care or even be aware of the grave political threats we face.*** One wonders if the adage about leading a horse to water, but not being able to force it to drink is appropriate here.

One wonders if part of the problem is an apathy arising from a disbelief in the idea that the common citizen can affect government decisions in any way no matter what he or she does. ***Money*** and ***corruption*** have a way of creating a divide between the citizen and “governance”--such as it is. We as a nation have to attack this problem, and we also need to ***ensure the preservation of a middle class.*** Absent a true middle class, corruption can take hold as it has in some of the “Narco-Democracies” of South America where the influence of money easily buys the loyalty of the impoverished class, and the ***law and judiciary become meaningless bastions of privilege*** owned by the monied few.

Issue—Statewide Organization: It became apparent that the workload of reviewing bills ***was enormous.*** ***There are just too many bills on too many topics that require too much time to analyze for a ten-member committee to handle.*** The LC chair wishes to note for the record and to ***commend LC committee members*** for the herculean efforts they expended on this challenge. There are two other organizations in Montana that were involved in doing this kind of work: ***The Montana Federation of Republican Women*** and the ***Freedom Caucus.*** There are 40 county central committees in Montana and Lake County is the ***only one with a legislative committee.*** ***If each county central committee had an established legislative committee of 5 members, there would be a work force of 200 analysts to review proposed bills.*** Using the 2023 estimated bill



count of 5,000 bills, a 200 person “work force” would only be tasked with reviewing 25 bills during a session. This is opposed to having ten people review **500 bills each**. It should also be noted that once an LC member reviews a bill, their work is not done. Those reviewed bills must be followed by an LC member to monitor for adverse changes (amendments that may be used to completely change the original intent of the bill) .

Currently the Montana Republican Party (MTGOP) has **no** statewide organization dedicated to legislative matters (It should be noted that **the Democrats do** and have an extremely effective system to motivate the grassroots to testify/vote/communicate/donate). The LC Chair has sought to find or obtain assistance from the MTGOP on the legislative front. **The chair's efforts at engaging the MTGOP have met with spectacular indifference**. This is a clear failure of leadership. Every special interest group has a dedicated individual or group of individuals who advocate to the legislature on behalf of their group's interests. **Who represents the grassroots Republicans on vital issues of legislative concern?** Apparently **not** the MTGOP.

MEETINGS:

Issue—Location: Our original plan was to meet on Wednesday mornings at the conference room of a local law office. Our LC members are spread out geographically over two counties in Western Montana. For some of our members to drive into a meeting would require them to travel 70+ miles one way. Added to the distances involved, the Montana Legislative session begins in the dead of *winter* (The session begins in January and ends in early May). Thus, **in person meetings were deemed to be unworkable**.



Recommendation/Solution: We reverted to using a **telephone conference system** provided by the LCRCC Chairman (EMeet). While we initially were going to use the “GoTo” Online Meeting System the LC has access to, we found the telephone conference system worked best, was easiest for our members to access, and did not require a laptop computer.

Issue—Time/Date of Meetings: We originally scheduled meetings at the time originally denoted for the TT meetings, which was Wednesday morning at 9:00 AM.

A member suggested that we change the time and date of our meetings to Monday morning at 10:00 A.M. This was deemed acceptable by the LC members.

Recommendation/Solution: We recommend weekly meetings scheduled very early in the week. This allows the LC the greatest latitude in dealing with the week's legislative bills.

Issue—Length of Meetings: The LC chair attempted to keep the length of meetings to one hour.

Recommendation/Solution: People are busy—especially those that volunteer for this type of work. Keeping the meeting length short was well received.

TOPICS:

Issue—Focus: The LC originally attempted to review *all* the numerous bills that were placed on the Legislative Calendar via the respective committee introducing the bill. It was estimated that during the 2023 legislative session some 5,000+ bills were put forward in one form or another. ***In short order, we found this to be unworkable.*** The LC members as a group came to the consensus that bills should be reviewed via two criteria.

1. The first criteria was by topic. This would allow committee members to apply their individual expertise (such as banking, legal, education, tribal or other issues) to specific issues. By working on a specific topic, it also allowed those members whose passion is greatest for a certain issue to become immersed in the bills touching on that issue. Further LC members learned to recognize what were essentially administrative bills that, while important, did not necessarily require much in the way of advocacy by the LCRCC.
2. The second criteria was one of ***support versus opposition.*** It became apparent there were a number of bills that we, as a committee, should advocate for and support. It also became clear there were a huge number of very “bad” bills that regularly get introduced into the legislature. Attention needed to be called to these bills to ensure their defeat. Note that we soon discovered that ***many of these “bad” bills were introduced by fellow Republicans.*** This is exasperating.

Recommendation/Solution: *Adopt a topic based analytical approach* for future LC work and follow these guidelines:

1. Identify specific areas of interest of the LCRCC as a whole and the interests of the LC volunteers. For example: Tribal relations, Judiciary, Water Rights.

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2. The LC should limit its analysis to three or four topics at most. While this leaves a great many bills un-analyzed, ***there is no practical way for the LC to cover every topic.*** (It does make one wonder how it is that we are bound by laws that are passed in these sessions when it is quite clear that no lone legislator has a prayer of keeping up with the pace at which these bills come at them. Therefore, it is clear we are passing laws that bind us even though they have not been reviewed by our law-makers!)
 3. Develop for each topic of interest a list of bills we **“SUPPORT”** and a list of bills we **“MUST OPPOSE”**.
 4. The LC and LCRCC should ***advocate for a statewide organization of similar legislative committees for each county central committee, thus allowing the workload to be spread.*** *Of all the recommendations we have that could lead to the greatest ability to ensure good legislation passes and bad legislation dies, it is this one.* We have to work as ‘we the people’ to advise and inform our elected officials on legislation. It cannot be left solely to them—especially noting that the Montana legislature has a high rate of turnover from session to session. To paraphrase an old saying and re-use it here, ***“Legislation is far too important to be left to legislators.”*** At least left to them on their own. The pace alone makes their job impossible and horse-trading and bargain making becomes the norm because the individual elected official cannot possibly have a handle on every piece of legislation he or she is going to be asked to vote on.

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COMMUNICATION WITH LEGISLATORS:

Issue: The LC channeled communications with legislators via two members of the LC. This simplified contact with the legislators. That said, it is not clear if those efforts were successful or not. The legislators should be interviewed to determine what worked well and what needs to be improved. Each legislator needs/wants to communicate via certain methods (text message, telephone call, or emails). The chair feels that his performance was less than effective in this area. Much of the potential improvement in this area will be based upon the relationship with LC members and individual legislators.

Solution/Recommendation: Devise a means to more effectively communicate with legislators. It is recommended that more in depth relationships with various legislators need to be developed/enhanced.

ISSUE: The LC Chair believes that *the frequency of needed contacts* between the LC and an individual legislator *needs to be high*. Once you multiply that by 4 or 5 legislators, the required communications become daunting to say the least. A chair can easily do nothing but spend all day attempting to communicate with multiple legislators, which tends to preclude the chair doing anything else.

Solution/Recommendation: We recommend an individual member of the LC *“adopt” a legislator* and act as the LC’s *single point of contact throughout the legislative session*. Each LC member who “adopts” a legislator would be free to find and use the system of communications that works best for them and their legislator.

CONCLUSION WITH REGARD TO EFFECTIVENESS OF OUR FIRST EFFORT AT DIRECTLY SUPPORT OUR LEGISLATORS:

Was the LC Effective? This is a difficult issue to address. Effectiveness may be viewed differently, by differing individuals, so instead we offer a list of legislative accomplishments for this session:

1. Established the *first and only Central Committee sponsored legislative committee in the state*.
2. Populated the committee with dedicated volunteers.
3. Reviewed in excess of **400 bills**.
4. Learned lessons of “what not to do”. This AAR is the result of that analysis.
5. Communicated with 6 or 7 state representatives and senators.
6. **Drafted 5 separate election integrity bills**. One was carried by Senator Theresa Manzella but ultimately failed. For the record, 3 of the committee members were engaged in weekly meetings drafting these 5 bills for nearly 2 years.
7. LC members **provided testimony in person and via an online system repeatedly**. Such efforts have generated an ongoing invitation from Senator Manzella’s group for our involvement and opinions.
8. Have **illuminated strategic weaknesses of the MTGOP in the legislative arena**.
9. Created a summary of bills reviewed that was regularly provided to legislators to express the views of the LCRCC.
10. Utilized the list noted in 9 above to communicate with grassroots members of the LCRCC about various bills.

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11. LC members ***gained exceptional insight into the legislative process*** and have, in their respective areas of interest, become highly versed in those topics and are now subject matter experts.

Should we do this again? The following comment is from the Chair of the LCRCC.

*"I believe this was a critically important effort. What this group did that was most important was to learn that our legislative process—the passing of bills that bind us by law—is an unrealistic, overloaded effort that makes a mockery of the notion that our elected officials have any serious chance of representing 'we the people' once they get into office. That is, **they can't possibly do the job** for which we have elected them **absent a serious supportive effort by those of us back home** who worked to get them elected. It is highly likely this is the situation at the Federal level as well.*

*"What this does is show that **the role of lobbyists in our politics is enormous**. Most of them are paid quite well to focus on single issues, and what chance do volunteers have when competing with such highly paid and experienced single-issue experts? I would dare say almost none.*

*"To me this highlights that the 'we the people' portion of governance—the most important part—needs to up its game considerably. I believe that can only happen if **Central Committees** across the state (and nation for that matter) **step up to the plate, form their own legislative support committees, and provide direct and regular support to the people they get elected to office.***

"Absent such an effort, laws that no one but a special-interest lobbyist have read and understood will be passed and become binding on us all no matter how senseless and arbitrary they might be."

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"I am proud of what our Legislative Committee did in 2023, and we must make this a top priority for 2025 in Montana."

Tracy Sharp

Chair, Lake County Republican Central Committee