

ROUTE  FIFTY

The Roadmap



Stop 3: Kansas City

Making Voting in Kansas Slightly Easier, for a Small Annual Fee

Sure, voters can fill out an advance voting application on their own, but this former state representative will do it for them.

BY JOHN CELOCK

Former Kansas State Rep. Stephanie Sharp has always filled out her husband's advanced ballot application, noting his work schedule, combined with family life leaves it tough for him to handle the task at times.

"He is an engineer and leaves at 6 a.m. and gets home at 6 p.m. I fill out his advanced ballot info and he signs it," the lifelong Kansan originally from Garden City who now lives in the Kansas City suburb of Lenexa, said in a recent interview.

The application for the advanced ballot isn't particularly difficult to fill out. But it's a step that can be an impediment for someone might have a busy to-do list, like many of Sharp's friends.

Sharp's husband suggested one day that she turn that application process into a business. Sharp took that idea and ran with it, creating KanVote last year.

Under the program, for \$10 a year, Sharp will fill out the application for advanced ballots for an individual and give it to them to sign and mail in.

Sure, Kansans can print out an advance ballot application, fill it out and mail it in on their own. But KanVote is about convenience.

"You are paying for my services to do [the advance ballot application] for you," Sharp, currently a countywide-elected trustee of Johnson County

Community College, said.

While KanVote makes it easier to vote, Sharp's service doesn't actually vote for its users. Sharp does not handle the actual advanced ballots and she does not vote on anyone's behalf. Sharp said an attorney has vetted the concept.

Elected to the Kansas House in 2002 at the age of 27, Sharp's service also aggregates information from various news articles, candidate questionnaires and ratings from outside groups all in the interest of providing information on candidates for users.

Sharp said that since unveiling KanVote during last year's competitive elections, she has gained clients who saw the service as another way to make their lives easier. But KanVote hasn't been without controversy.

Several conservative Republicans in the state Legislature—Sharp is a moderate Republican—had objected to the plan when she unveiled KanVote last year, concerned whether it was legal. The debate did not stop voters from embracing KanVote.

Sharp said companies have approached her with interest to provide the advance voting application service for employees.

Stuart Smith, a financial advisor from Overland Park, signed up after hearing Sharp present KanVote at a One Million Cups [This is a networking event for entrepreneurs

where two entrepreneurs present each week on their ideas and companies. Similar events take place across the country.] event sponsored by the Kauffman Foundation in Kansas City last year. He praised Sharp for providing candidate information as well.

“What Stephanie is providing was a way to vote from the comfort of our home,” Smith said. “Not only was I able to vote in the primary by signing the application and mailing it, Stephanie’s website had information on the candidates. It was nice one-stop shopping.” KanVote is Sharp’s second venture related to political technology.

After leaving the state House in January 2008, Sharp started realizing how tough it had been to keep track of interactions she had had with constituents, particularly when she was on their doorsteps campaigning.

She noted that when she worked on Capitol Hill there were plenty of [constituent-management] tools for members of Congress, but in Topeka she was primarily on her own with only part-time assistance during the legislative session.

“It was kind of a nightmare,” Sharp said. “When I would get to a door I would recognize someone’s name because I had a string of emails with them but I could not remember what it was about.”

Sharp’s program, VoteSharp, can be used by legislators while campaigning but also while governing. She describes it as a database where emails can be filed and sorted by topics, along with combined with voter

data. When a legislator arrives at a door, she said they can pull up every interaction with the constituent and discuss various topics with them.

State Rep. Melissa Rooker, a Republican from Fairway and VoteSharp client, said she uses the system not only during campaign season but also during the legislative session. She said she can organize emails she receives by keywords for future reference and to keep track of how her constituents feel on issues.

She also said she can sort between the constituents who were contacting her versus others around the state. Rooker stressed that she does consider the opinions of non-constituents since she believes it’s her job to look out for statewide interests.

Rooker noted that during a recent debate on ending the state’s existing school finance formula and replacing it with block grants for two years, she received 500 emails on the issue, the most of any issue.

She said it was helpful to have a simple way to organize them and gauge sentiment. Rooker said all of the emails she received on block grants were against the plan.

“It was unbelievable on how helpful it was,” Rooker said of VoteSharp during the block grants debate. ☺

John Celock is the editor of The Celock Report and the author of The Next Generation: Young Elected Officials and their Impact on American Politics and based in Washington, D.C. He has written several hundred stories on Kansas politics since 2011, and in 2014 spent 39 days traveling 5,000 miles around Kansas, spending time in the state’s rural, suburban and urban communities. He has been named as honorary deputy marshal of Dodge City, Kansas.

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STUART SMITH, OVERLAND PARK FINANCIAL ADVISOR