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Mayoral recall drives go viral

By Haya El Nasser

Fifty-seven mayors faced recall attempts last year, up from 23 in 2009, according to Ballotpedia, a non-profit that tracks recall elections. So far this year: 15. Almost all have failed.

Recalls are so frequent that the U.S. Conference of Mayors today launches a campaign warning mayors to brace for recalls. The effort includes a documentary-style film, *Recall Fever: Stop the Madness*. The film recounts recent recall efforts in Omaha; Miami; Akron, Ohio; and Chattanooga, Tenn.

“Any person who’s coming in to serve needs to understand this is happening,” says Tom Cochran, CEO and executive director of the non-partisan mayor’s group. Cochran says that budgetary decisions made in this tough economic climate are likely to trigger more anger. “If they don’t have a website, if they don’t have a blogger,” he says of mayors, “they better, by God, get one.”

Unhappy voters no longer wait until the next election to boot someone out of office, he says, because the Internet and other technology allow them to spread the word and gather signatures for recall petitions fast.

“There is inside this country right now an anti-tax, anti-spending mood,” Cochran says. “It’s a new thing in America: We’re going to kick you out of office. They don’t have to wait anymore.”

Voters generally like recalls, says Joshua Spivak, who writes a blog on recall elections and is a senior fellow at the Hugh L. Carey Institute for Government Reform at Wagner College in New York City. “That’s the whole point of democracy,” he says. “Mayors have to accept that ... that’s part of the challenges of being a public elected official.”

Most recalls fail, but last month, Miami-Dade County mayor Carlos Alvarez, who listed no party preference, was ousted by 88% of voters in a special election. Alvarez angered constituents when he gave pay increases to staffers and raised property taxes during a housing bust.

Akron lawyer Warner Mendenhall led a failed 2009 effort to recall Mayor Don Plusquellic, a Democrat who has been in office 23 years.

“The spending has gotten out of hand,” says Mendenhall, who calls himself a liberal Democrat. “The mayor had spent us into a deep, deep hole and needed to go.” Mendenhall says he collected more than double the 3,200 signatures needed to put the recall on the ballot, using blogs and robocalls to spread information.

“Even five years ago we couldn’t have accomplished that,” he says. “We have a wonderful ability to coordinate and to share information. ... We’re able to do it more rapidly.” The 2009 effort “pointed out a lot of things wrong with the city,” Mendenhall says.

The special election cost the city almost \$200,000, and Plusquellic spent \$300,000 to beat the recall. Plusquellic, who is up for re-election this year, says: “Things have never been as tough. Now, people are just dissatisfied with government in general. They hate everybody.”

Cities should toughen requirements for recall elections and remind voters that recalls cost money, Cochran says. “If Don (Plusquellic) had done something criminal and corrupt, he should be kicked out of office,” he says. “But so many of these recalls are not about corruption or malfeasance.”

Says Plusquellic: “We can’t afford to have an election every other year because somebody is ticked off.”