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Mayors group fights back against recall elections

By LESLEY CLARK, McClatchy Newspapers

WASHINGTON — Alarmed by an apparent increase of angry voters looking to boot their mayors out of office, the organization that represents the elected officials is going on the offensive.

The U.S. Conference of Mayors is fighting back against a spike in recall elections with a documentary, “Recall Fever,” and a public awareness initiative that aims to arm targeted mayors with more information.

“We have laws in place to combat corruption and malfeasance when a local elected official commits a wrongdoing, but it’s become too easy to launch a recall campaign, and it’s doing a lot of damage,” conference director Tom Cochran says in the documentary.

Ballotpedia, a nonprofit organization that tracks recall elections, identified 57 mayors who faced recall attempts last year, up from 23 in 2009. Fifteen of the 57 mayors either resigned or lost their offices. This year, 15 mayors already have faced recall elections, from Portland, Ore., to Miami-Dade County, Fla., the largest municipal recall election in U.S. history.

At a news conference Tuesday, Cochran identified one enemy of the mayors: bloggers who attack elected officials.

“Today we have the social media,” he said. “The bloggers are out there every night and every day.”

Cochran said he’d urge mayors to fight back against the blogs and check the laws that regulated recall elections. He said 38 states allowed the recall of local officials, though some required specific reasons such as malfeasance or corruption.

The mayors noted that there were some common factors in the recall efforts, including the targeting of mayors who have raised taxes or slashed budgets.

“Do you want mayors who take the positions that are necessary to do the right thing for the community, or do you want to listen to the naysayers?” asked Akron, Ohio, Mayor Don Plusquellic, who survived a recall effort in 2009.

Wealthy individuals bankrolled several recall efforts. One of them, billionaire businessman Norman Braman, who spent \$1 million on last month’s successful recall of Miami-Dade Mayor Carlos Alvarez, suggested that the mayors conference had misplaced priorities.

“They should try to improve the quality of the mayors they represent instead of trying to protect them,” said Braman, who targeted Alvarez after the mayor pushed for a property tax hike to plug a gaping budget hole. “These are difficult times, and it’s not time to raise taxes and give staff salary increases. That’s what it was all about. If the mayors were more responsible to the needs of the county, they wouldn’t need to face the risk of a recall.”

Cochran suggested that the threshold for securing a recall election might be too low, allowing a small minority to oust a popularly elected mayor.

In Akron, critics needed only 3,200 signatures to secure a recall election in June 2009.

Ron Littlefield, the mayor of Chattanooga, Tenn., who survived a recall last August, said he was afraid the campaigns were turning off potential candidates.

“If I had known I was going into all this, my wife would have insisted that I not run again for mayor,” he said, adding that his opponents unleashed a “vile” and “puerile” Internet attack against him. “That’s the thing I think is most damaging and most frightening. ... I’m hearing many people say, ‘With all that going on, I wouldn’t do it.’”

The mayors said the recalls also were expensive for cities that already were struggling to contain costs, and that they distracted government employees from carrying out the city’s business. Akron’s recall cost the city about \$175,000, the documentary says.

Joshua Spivak, a senior fellow at the Hugh L. Carey Institute for Government Reform at Wagner College in New York, said cities could save money by holding recall and replacement elections at the same time.

“There are some real negatives to the recall,” said Spivak, who isn’t affiliated with the mayors group. “But if people want to use it, it is their right.”