

City Clerk Project, February-March, 2018

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This project grew out of discussions during our Program Planning Meeting in January. The national focus of the League is currently voting rights, improving elections, redistricting and campaign financing. Since ease of voting and ballot security have been in the news recently, our League thought it would be interesting to speak with our city clerks to learn about the election process from an administrative point of view in our own communities.

We sent a letter to each clerk at the end of February outlining the type of information we were interested in. We followed up with a call for an appointment. We interviewed City Clerks from St. Clair Shores, Harper Woods, Grosse Pointe Park, Grosse Pointe Woods, the City of Grosse Pointe, and received a written statement from Grosse Pointe Shores Clerk. Our stated intention was to summarize responses and to publicize the information through The Voter and our web site to educate voters.

Although our conversations were informal, we all included the following topics:

Expansion of the absentee ballot

The time allowed for voters currently overseas

Maintenance of voter lists

Availability and training of precinct workers

As a preface, one of the City Clerks said that Michigan's voting laws and procedures have a long history of being very detailed and clear. Clerks everywhere in Michigan have consistent guidelines for running elections. That being said, the election process is complex and affects every voter, so the Legislature should avoid any last minute procedural changes.

Absentee ballots: All the clerks we interviewed agreed that in their particular jurisdictions unrestricted absentee ballots would be easier for voters and for their offices. All mentioned citizens who did not qualify to vote absentee choosing not to vote at all, rather than lie to get an application. One mentioned that the very long ballots slowed the process down at the polls, and if all those who qualified for an absentee ballot used one it would be helpful. There was general agreement that if all voting was done absentee it would not place undue pressure on their offices.

Not all clerks had voters living overseas, but those who did felt the current 45 days was adequate to complete the voting process. Voters living abroad must apply before they can receive a ballot, and they can ask for the ballot to be sent electronically. An electronic ballot must be printed out, marked, and returned by mail. All of this requires the voter to plan well ahead. If the ballot could be returned by email it would be convenient and quicker for the voter, but it would compromise secrecy.

Ballots printed from emails are counted separately by two people from different parties, since the markings must be transcribed to a regular ballot in order to be counted electronically. If a voter wishes to mark an official paper ballot himself, he/she has time to request and return the ballot.

Voter Lists: Now that voter lists are computerized, they are very easy to maintain. Those voters moving within the state of Michigan and who wish to register in their new location will have their voting record transfer with them. New registrations are sent by the Secretary of State to the counties, which then distribute them to the appropriate voting district. Most registrations come to the City Clerks via the Secretary of State, although new residents can register in person at City Hall. Occasionally there are delays, and Clerks advise new registrants to bring their registration receipt with them when they vote the first time in a new district, just in case their name is not yet on the register.

Registration Deadline: There were mixed feelings about shortening the time between registration and voting. Our communities are fairly small and an unmanageable flood of last minute registrations is unlikely. As one Clerk pointed out, no matter what the deadline is, there will always be people who miss it. A Clerk must validate a registration, which takes some time, so same day registration does not leave enough time for verification, especially if a voter is coming from out of state.

Precinct Workers: Most of our City Clerks rely on a core group of experienced precinct workers, and they are always looking for adults to supplement this core group. Many of the Clerks recruit high school seniors to help on Election Day and have found them to be reliable and enthusiastic. They are comfortable with the changing technology, and help other precinct workers who are less familiar with it. Precinct workers must be trained, and a down side of using high school students is that they usually only work one year. Some Clerks have difficulty recruiting adults willing to work the long day, and other Clerks report no difficulty at all. There must be at least three workers at each precinct, but many precincts hire extra people to direct voters or provide special help.

Technology: The State of Michigan provides voting machines to all precincts. From time to time the State selects several machines which it deems suitable, and each county holds a “voting machine fair” for clerks to interview vendors, learn about the different options and make recommendations. The county then determines which machine it will use. In Michigan we use paper ballots that are counted electronically. Touch screen voting is available for those unable to mark a ballot, and there is a special machine for the blind. The county is responsible for maintaining the machines. If one breaks down on Election Day and the Clerk cannot fix it, trouble shooters are available from the county. If a city wishes to have a spare machine on hand, it must be purchased. One Clerk observed that the Federal Government should allocate enough money to keep the equipment current and any mandates should receive monetary support.

In summary, the City Clerks we interviewed are very experienced at their jobs. There is high priority at the State level to minimize the wait time to vote, and unrestricted absentee ballots would be very helpful in that regard. Changes in technology require re-training at every level, and although the training modules are very good, it is still challenging to properly train everyone involved.