

TOMPKINS COUNTY
BOARD OF ELECTIONS

REVIEW OF 2003

COMMISSIONERS

Elizabeth W. Cree and Stephen M. DeWitt

REORGANIZATIONAL Plan

NEW STAFFING WITHIN BUDGET CONSTRAINTS

2003 started with many changes to the structure of the Board of Elections. Budget cuts resulted in a loss of two full time employees. In January, one new Commissioner on the Democratic side of the aisle, a new Assistant to the Commissioner (promoted from within) and two new part time employees started. This required that staffing duties be reassigned due to the lack of full time positions and new federal legislation.

Quickly it became apparent that business as usual just was not possible anymore with fewer staff. We reorganized the duties and cut any "extras" that we currently provided. The following were reduced or eliminated:

- Counter lists run on a monthly basis (saved a day's work and 4 reams of paper, new record keeping measures for Election Results to save inputting twice).
- The returns of canvass were no longer published in the local newspaper.
- Inspector training classes were reduced and the size of the classes went from 20 to 80 trainees (reduced approximately 80 hours of training)
- Web page updates are not as timely. Not as much information as the voters would like available.
- Outreach programs were severely reduced. Commissioners had to assist with many clerical duties to make tight deadlines.

Staff was asked to work as many hours as possible and we still couldn't complete all our yearly tasks. In 2004, we are finally filing our mail check that began in late August. Our Legislative committee, Consumer and Community Affairs recognized our efforts and did recommend for restoration of staff to our original level. They worked with us throughout the year and tried to assist us with new ideas to lessen our load. We appreciate the time they spent with us over the many NEW issues from HAVA.

HELP AMERICA VOTE ACT (HAVA)

This legislation was under a lot of scrutiny this year especially because the requirements needed to be defined for implementation. It was a long year with many discussions and many changes to our current operations. A state task force was set up and a plan was submitted to the federal government this past summer. This plan now has to wait for review by the Election Assistance Commission. The National Institute of Standards and Technology met with 170 people representing different groups to discuss the concerns around the new voting machines. The biggest push seen around the state is for machines with a paper trail because there is a concern about security. We are aware of one vendor that will have this option available in February of 2004. Our board is committed to making a very educated and informed decision before purchasing any machines.

Funds: New York State has received over \$66 million in federal money with approximately \$830 million remaining for distribution to all states. At this time, New York State has not been granted authority to allot any monies.

STATEWIDE VOTER REGISTRATION DATABASE: Since no funds have been allocated, the continuing work of a statewide database will have to wait until 2005. An outside firm will be hired on state contract to help with the design and then the project will be put out to bid. Once this system is in place, we will be able to keep much better track of registrants to ensure no "double" voting is occurring from county to county or state to state.

CENTRALIZATION PLAN FOR THE NEW HAVA ACT

Board of Elections must develop a transitional plan to introduce the new electronic machines to the public as well as the actual running of the election with the new equipment. Not knowing when the funds would be available, the Commissioners presented a plan early in the year for Centralization of the machines. Our plan has been shared with counties around the state. Currently, each municipality owns and maintains their machines. For years, the discrepancy between towns, their storage and maintenance plans has caused difficulties in making sure the machines are in good working order. Because the electronic machines will have different requirements such as backing up the systems three times during the year, it would be more effective to own the machines and keep them in one central location. The ideal location would be the "old library" which is very close to our office. The space requirements are perfect for our needs. Currently, there is state legislation being introduced for all boards to be centralized. But, this brings up different issues because of payment of custodians and election inspectors. For a general election, the budget impact would be approximately \$160,000 more for local share funds that we currently do not receive from the county. Our board does not wish to take over the current machines, but would rather wait until the new machines have been purchased. Whether we centralize or not should be decided in 2004.

NEW VOTER REGISTRATION FORM AND IDENTIFICATION REQUIREMENTS

Our voter registration form for the State of New York is revised every four years after a Gubernatorial election. The reason behind the change is that a party must receive 50,000 votes statewide to receive ballot status. HAVA now requires identification for any new voters by mail. Little did we know that a court case would hold up the whole process and we did not have a new form until a couple of weeks before the General Election! This caused our workload to increase because there was no place for voters to write down their NY state driver's license number or the last 4 digits of their social security number. Staff had to send letters out to all new voters by mail to obtain this information. If we had the new form it would have saved the additional mailings.

COURT CASES AND LEGISLATIVE CHANGES

174 petitions were filed for 72 offices and out those we had several challenges. The Commissioners upheld all petitions, except one. A petition for Tompkins County Court, Family Court Judge and Surrogate went to the Supreme Court and was heard by Justice Robert Mulvey. This petition was also upheld. This consumed most of our summer months.

Statewide court cases changed the way we maintain our records at the board. Three recognized parties, the Green, Liberal and Right to Life parties did not receive enough

votes statewide to have automatic ballot status. The parties still want the boards to maintain voter records of their registrants. With an unprecedented decision, the judge ruled that the county boards must keep track of all former and future Green, Right to Life and Liberal party members and all future enrollees in the Libertarian and Marijuana Reform parties. This changed our database as well as requiring an “other” box on our registration form for writing in party names. The outcome of another interesting court case in 2003 now allows all non-enrolled voters to participate in an Independence Party Primary election for statewide and federal offices.

MERIT AWARD RECEIVED FROM STATE BOARD OF ELECTIONS

For the fifth year in a row, the Tompkins County Board of Elections received an award for innovative procedures in elections. Out of 62 county boards only a handful were recognized at the annual spring conference. Our county board is always in constant contact with other boards and we share different ideas throughout the year. Our staff is committed to new ideas that make our processes move more smoothly. This team effort is what makes our board stand out amongst their peers. Commissioner Cree continues to work with the Election Commissioners’ Association as the first Vice-President.

POLLING PLACE CHANGES/REDISTRICTING

We finally finished redistricting the city of Ithaca, which was a three-year process. The town and city of Ithaca also had changes in polling locations and both municipalities wanted to ensure that the voters received more than the one required notice for these changes. We worked with the municipalities and only charged them for supplies for the additional mailing. Our town clerks have been extremely helpful with coordination on election days and throughout the year. It really is a pleasure to work with them and they truly understand the efforts needed to make an election run efficiently.

VOTER REGISTRATION STATISTICS

MAIL CHECK

A total of 46,777 mail check cards were mailed to Tompkins County residents on August 26, 2003. The mail check card serves several purposes – verification of residence and mailing address, notification of election information, and it has also become a great tool in recruiting election inspectors.

MCF	1,390	In County Transfers	1, 532
MCNF	1, 024	Misc. Returns	641
Total Card Returned		4,587	

NATIONAL CHANGE OF ADDRESS

The Board annually compares voter rolls against the National Listing prior to June 1. Unfortunately this year, due to a change in the state chosen vendor, the NCOA was delayed until June 9, 2003. This meant that the 1,024 changes that needed to be made unfortunately coincided with the time to sign and pass designating petitions.

In County Transfers	494
Out of County (Inactive)	530

INSPECTORS

As stated earlier, the number of inspector classes were reduced, resulting in only 7 classes in 2003, with 132 inspectors trained. The average test score was 83 and the average age is 62. The number of new recruits totaled 52. Recruitment of inspectors is extremely difficult. An important point to remember about the training is even though the bigger class size is a timesaver; we believe the smaller classes allow for better training. Some of the attendees will ask more questions in a smaller group. We offered some ideas to the legislators in trying to assist us in our recruitment. Anita Fitzpatrick, the personnel director, also offered some good ideas. Our plan now is to work with the County Workforce Development Agency. They have access to lists of substitute teachers, bus drivers and other outlets that we didn't have access to before. The 17 plus hour day is the major hindrance in retaining our inspectors. The pay of approximately \$100 for the day doesn't tempt anyone when the hours are extremely long. Until legislation is passed to split working shifts, our only alternative is to ask the towns to pay a higher rate. We are working with the county to declare this a county holiday, which would give us a chance to hire county employees as well.

SPECIAL ACTIVITIES AND PROJECTS

We sponsored a display of the new electronic machines from 7 different vendors. Inspectors, machine custodians, town officials and county employees were invited to our office to test and comment on each machine. The participants really appreciated us bringing the machines to them and the feedback was very useful.

One major project completed in the beginning of the year was to categorize and move our purged files to the old Library for quicker access to current files. Having more space allowed us to work quicker. A big thanks to staff members Tom Paolangeli and Kate Bortz: a lot of hard work was involved.

The two Executive Assistants continued our outreach at Ithaca High School. Kimberly Spencer and Kristie Sopp had glowing reports from the school staff. They also traveled to the nursing homes as mandated and have really worked out a great schedule with the facilities. Unfortunately, because all projects and outreach coordination is a bi-partisan team, we couldn't spare the staff to do more.

2004 FUTURE PLANS

Many of our plans are on hold because of the lack of funding. As soon as the funds are released for the machines and the database, major planning will have to occur on how to run the elections, voter education, and training. A new idea that we are working on is having a cell phone available at each polling site. Polling sites that allow their phones to be used during the day don't always have phones available after 5:00 p.m. Reaching the election inspectors is critical because of possible machine problems or electioneering. We are hoping that one of the cell phone companies will donate their phones and airtime for the day. Another idea came from Larry Roberts, the Director of the Fingerlakes Independent Center. He suggested 8 ½ x 11 magnifying glasses to read the results correctly. The magnifying glasses are very affordable and should make the inspector's job easier. The voters should find the glasses convenient for reading the small print on the propositions. We will also be holding an Annual Custodian Meeting to prepare for the following year's election.

Legislative priorities for 2004 will be based on voter education, funding of county boards and inspector retention and recruitment. Commissioners DeWitt and Cree continue to lobby our local legislators on beneficial improvements to elections. We have heard responses from all our representatives and they have commended our efforts on many occasions.

Cost saving initiatives, as always, will be a top priority. We have already saved the town unnecessary advertising costs. We have changed vendors and purchased a new time clock, which will save \$157/year and paper costs of over \$200/year. We know that these are not huge amounts, but every savings adds up. Unfortunately, the Tompkins County Legislature passed a resolution on August 5, 2003 to reduce to cost of a voter export CD. The price dropped from \$80.00 to \$5.00, significantly decreasing our potential revenue. Their solution was to increase our budget \$2,000 for 2003 only. This revenue will be extremely hard to replace in the coming years.

2004 will present many unique challenges to our Board. Somehow we must balance funding constraints against the increased workload of a Federal election year and the numerous new time and resource consuming State and Federal mandates. We will do our best to maintain our position as one of the most innovative and best run Boards in New York State.

Respectfully submitted;

Elizabeth W. Cree

Stephen M. DeWitt

Commissioners of Elections