

Tompkins County Board of Elections

2006 Annual Report

INTRODUCTION

2006 was a year of many challenges for the Board of Elections. We had to take over the ownership, maintenance and programming of all voting machines, conduct the certification and scheduling of all poll sites, integrate our records with a Statewide database, implement an accessible vote-marking machine, educate the public about possible new voting machines, and stay on top of constantly shifting directives and timelines from the State due to Federal lawsuits and HAVA implementation issues.

CONSOLIDATION

One of our biggest challenges and the most time consuming event of 2006 was “Consolidation.” The Election Reform Modernization Act (ERMA) mandated that County Board of Elections take over all the election-related functions that the individual City and Town Clerks used to perform, such as the purchase, storage and maintenance of election machines, poll site contracting and certification, and the hiring and payment of inspectors and custodians.

A tremendous effort was needed to accomplish all this in a short time frame, so staff hours were increased.

We established contacts and visited 50 poll sites to certify disabled access. More than a few sites needed remedial action, and we applied for HAVA grants for improvements. (We also applied for HAVA grants for voter education.)

Besides site visits and machine storage and maintenance issues, consolidation meant our office had to create and implement an administrative structure: new procedures, databases, forms, letters, and the assignment of additional responsibilities amongst the staff.

We eventually took possession of approximately 85 mechanical lever voting machines that had been stored around the county. We obtained the use of county-owned space on the main floor of the “Old Library” building on Cayuga Street and moved all the machines to this location.

This proved to be a less than ideal site: loading in a machine means rolling it from the loading dock through the Community Justice Center on the basement floor, then using an elevator to reach the main floor. On more than one occasion the elevator broke down. The roof of the library developed leaks, and we had to caution our workers to avoid standing on wet carpet when operating power tools. There were problems with access and keeping the air conditioning on when our technicians worked at night. And, County Records, who share our floor space and is in desperate need of more room was constantly encroaching on our allotted space.

But in any event, we eventually rounded up all of the old machines, and a crew of “machine technicians” (formerly known as “custodians”) began a complete inventory and maintenance program. We found some municipalities, like the City of Ithaca, had done a very good job of maintaining their equipment, while others had clearly let maintenance lapse. We anticipated that these old machines would only see service in 2006 before being “retired,” so we tried to avoid any costly repairs whenever possible. Remember, most of these machines are now 30 – 50 years old.

After months of hard work and planning, we were pleased that the first big test of consolidation, the September Primary, came off with very few problems. We contracted with a trucking company, Lake Country Moving and Storage, for delivery and return of the voting machines. We had a crew of technicians conduct on-site visits to make sure the right machines were in the right places, and that they were in good working order.

We also purchased new “Polling Place” directional signs that can be easily set up and taken down. More than a few voters noticed and thanked us for this initiative.

NEW POLL SITES

Increasing population in the county meant we needed to create at least one new poll site. We chose to add one at Kendal at Ithaca, a large continuing care retirement community. This was a great success; participation was exceptionally high. Turn out percentage for the Primary was twice as high as any other election district.

Our survey of polling sites revealed accessibility and parking problems with the Lehman Alternatives School, so we moved that district’s poll site to the Chemung Canal Trust Company. Our inspectors especially appreciated working at this new site.

We also found accessibility problems with South Hill Fire Station, so we relocated to the Ithaca College Circle Apartments Community Center just up the road.

Concerns with access also prompted a move from the Enfield Community Center to the Enfield Elementary School.

And finally, since the Class of '18 building at Cornell was due to be demolished, we opened a new polling place at the Alice Cook House on Cornell's West Campus.

MACHINE DEMOS

As part of our outreach and education program, we conducted a series of new voting machine demonstrations. We invited all the vendors who were scheduled to submit machines for New York State certification to bring their latest design so that our voters, inspectors, technicians and staff could try them. Representatives from Sequoia, Liberty, Avante and ES&S brought their various machines and systems. We collected surveys and comments from the attendees. Results and pictures are still posted on our website, votetompkins.com. (see link on left side: Voting Machine Demos).

PLAN "B" MACHINE

As part of the Department of Justice suit, we were required to purchase a special voting machine that could be used by voters with disabilities. We purchased an Avante Vote-Trakker auto-ballot-marking machine. We set the machine up at the Board office. One person used the machine for the primary, and one used it for the November General Election. One voter was unhappy with his voting experience, while the other was quite pleased. The original plan called for the machine to be scrapped after 2006, but it's possible we may use it again in 2007. Total costs for this machine came to \$10,266; thus it cost about \$5,000 per voter.

ELECTIONS

2006 had Village elections, Republican and Democratic Primaries, and a General election featuring statewide and local seats. On the local level, an extremely close race for Newfield Town Justice race generated a lot of suspense, with Election Night results showing a one vote margin. The race was not decided until the Commissioners ruled on absentee and affidavit ballots. The certified winning margin ended up being only 6 votes, underscoring the importance that each and every vote be counted fairly and accurately.

NYSVOTER I (Statewide Database)

HAVA mandated the creation of statewide databases. 2006 saw the implementation of an interim statewide database, called NYSVOTER I. Commissioner DeWitt was a member of the Statewide Database Policy Committee. He and other staff members attended a number of meetings during the year about the setup and use of this database, and by late

summer we were connected and began making daily uploads. The result of this process should mean more accurate registration records throughout the State.

In late Spring 2007 we are scheduled to switch over to the final “real” version of the database, NYSVOTER II.

FULL DOCUMENT IMAGING PROJECT

In 2006 we finished our back file conversation for our Full Doc Imaging Project. New records are now scanned in as received. This project has proved to be a tremendous office time saver, as well as enhancing the preservation of our records.

WEB SITE

Our website, votetompkins.com, run in-house by Deputy Tom Paolangeli, continued to receive accolades and heavy usage. It is consistently among the most viewed sites on the County server, and our “hits” really spike around elections. Voters really appreciate being able to easily find information, sample ballots and forms online. The media and candidates especially appreciate how quickly we post detailed election results and the ease of accessing past results. We’re one of the few counties in New York State that provides highly detailed election results on our web site. All the above saves us a lot time (and money) in the office.

STAFF

In January, Republican Deputy Kate Bortz resigned to pursue educational opportunities. Senior Clerk Krystal Hastings moved up to the Deputy position, and Jennifer Terpening, who had worked on our SARA Grant project, joined our staff as the Republican Senior Clerk.

We created a new part-time position, “Senior Voting Technician,” and hired two workers. (One Democrat, one Republican.)

Through the auspices of a Tompkins Workforce NY program for young adults we obtained a part-time program assistant, Ann Owens, to help with filing and scanning and other administrative functions.

In an effort to improve our productivity, many of the staff attended short training seminars in areas such as advanced Word, Excel, and PowerPoint, and the use of our election management software (TEAM). Commissioners and Deputies also attended a number of conferences and meetings throughout the year in order to stay informed and weigh in on all the changes and problems due to HAVA and ERMA.

BY THE NUMBERS

To help illustrate some of our activities in 2006, below are some important facts and figures.

Voter Database:

As of 12/31/06 we had 48,140 Active voters, and 10,581 Inactive voters in our database.

New Registrations Processed	2,987
In County Address Changes	4,671
Enrollment Changes	478
Name Changes	536
Duplicate Applications	738
Other (Inspector info, 911, etc)	9,457
Confirmation Notices Sent	6,695
Cancellations	1,069

Inspectors:

Inspectors Appointed & Trained	296
Alternate Inspectors Trained	197
Classes Held	30

Mailcheck:

(Used to verify voter's residence and mailing address, notify them of election dates and their polling site, and recruit inspectors.)

Mailed out	48,237
Returned	3,279

Absentee Ballots Out:

Primary	918
General	1,786

LOOKING AHEAD

2007 will be a very busy year for us. Over 60 local races will be contested in Tompkins County, which means a multitude of candidates, petitions, filings and questions. We have some technical challenges ahead, as we switch over to a new SQL Server in order to run the new software required to connect to the final version of the statewide database. Greg Potter and his staff in the Information Technology Services department have been and will be invaluable in supporting us in this effort.

We'll continue to refine our procedures related to Consolidation. For example, though there are costly commercial software programs available for voting machine database management, we plan to use in-house talent to adapt and modify an Access program Dutchess County has developed. This should save us \$7,000 a year in maintenance costs alone.

As of this writing, it seems extremely unlikely we will implement new voting machines this year, given recent setbacks in the State's certification program. We have done extensive pre-planning for rolling out new machines, so we're as prepared as possible. But the reality is, in order to conduct all the voter education, outreach, inspector training and technician training needed, purchase and delivery would have to take place early this year, and that is now virtually impossible. Ultimately we will be bound to abide by whatever ruling the Department of Justice makes concerning HAVA compliance for New York State in 2007. By accomplishing so much with Consolidation in 2006, at least we're as prepared as we possibly can be to deal with whatever new challenges may come our way in 2007.