

Minnehaha County Election Review Committee

January 16, 2015 Meeting

Meeting Notes:

Attendees: Lorie Hogstad, Sue Roust, Julie Pearson, Kea Warne, Deb Elofson, Bruce Danielson, Joel Arends

I. Call to Order

II. Approval of Agenda

Motion by Lorie Hogstad. Seconded by Deb Elofson. Motion passed unanimously.

III. Approval of Minutes from meeting on December 19, 2014.

Motion to approve as amended by Sue Roust. Removing the line about the Secretary of State approves the State Elections Board. Motion to approve by Kea Warne. Seconded by Hogstad. Motion Passes unanimously.

IV. Discussion of Auditor's Office Absentee Ballot Distribution, Collection and Counting Process

Chairman Danielson asked that the discussion open with a briefing from the Auditor's Office about how absentee ballots are distributed. Senior Elections Technician Heather Irwin briefed the committee. Any eligible registered voter can request a ballot. The first thing the office must determine is what ballot the voter should be given. That will depend on what legislative district they're in and what political party they choose.

Joel Arends asked if there's a written policy manual directing this part of the process. There is not. Sue Roust commented that state law is specific about the process and practices that must be followed. Arends followed up that he is most interested in specifically if there is a process directing how envelopes are labeled and the ballots inserted in those envelopes for ballots requested by mail.

The Total Vote program makes the determination which labels and ballots are printed out for a voter. Total Vote is a new, live program that has been implemented within the last 1 to 2 years across South Dakota. It's a multi-use system that generates voter registration lists for candidates, and can be used to create voting maps as well. Julie Pearson explained that Total Vote is a state-wide

combined voter list of information collected and maintained by County Auditors. Each county owns and maintains their list. Bruce Danielson indicated he's very interested in the process by which the large volumes of data from each county are migrated into the state system and the details of the system that accomplishes the transfer. Sue Roust explained that at the time she was Minnehaha County Auditor an algorithm existed that would move the data from the county system to the state system and assign it a precinct number and legislative district based on the information submitted. After that information was loaded into the state system (Total Vote), that data would be shared with counties to verify that it transferred correctly.

Sue Roust said there are two ways a voter would get a wrong ballot. It would either be a clerical error or an error in the data base. Julie Pearson explained a clerical error occurs when an employee has the correct information in front of them and pulls an incorrect ballot out of the wrong envelope. Joel Arends asked how Minnehaha County safeguards against clerical errors. Julie Pearson explained a clerical error occurs when there is a breakdown between the label that's printed out and the ballot that's pulled. In Pennington County the election worker repeats the party affiliation, the legislative district and the precinct to the voter in an effort to catch such errors. Those errors are usually caught when a voter absentee votes in person and hears the incorrect information. Errors that aren't caught generally involve ballots that are mailed out. In Pennington County the only way the error is caught after its comes back is when the ballot is run through the scanner. When the ballots are processed by precinct, the machine will kick out ballots that are not from that precinct. If the ballot is kicked out, it's still valid but it must be processed with the correct precinct or district. If it's an invalid style, the office will know the voter was given the wrong ballot. There are always some of these errors, but not a large number. Sue Roust & Julie Pearson said there are usually less than 10 of these errors per election. Debra Elofson indicated there were 13 of these errors at her table this year.

Julie Pearson said it's her understanding these were not the errors Minnehaha County experienced. Many of the errors here involved information that had been submitted correctly to the state by Minnehaha County using the Street Master computer program. When that information would come back to the county for verification there were times it would be incorrect. Pennington County had different issues. They had a full-time Information Technology person working to marry up the county's voter information list and the Street Master list. Pennington

County would find out there was a problem when two people at the same house would get different ballots. Maintaining Street Master takes a lot of effort. Some of Pennington's problems stemmed from the fact that streets didn't comply with the "Melissa" system. "Melissa" is an input system, similar to NCOA. It's a way to record changes of address. You can't load a street into Total Vote until it's loaded into Street Master. Street Master is the statewide standard for entering streets.

Bruce Danielson asked what happens when an absentee ballot is mailed back to the office. All ballots are date-stamped when they are received in the office. They're bar-coded and scanned, verifying that they've been received. They're filed in alphabetical order within the precinct. That's prior to Election Day. On Election Day they're opened by the board and counted. The official ballot stamp is placed on the ballot when it's opened. The envelope an absentee ballot is received in will have a total of two stamps, one when it's received and one when it's opened on Election Day. Sue Roust commented that ballots can be counted before polls close, the results just can't be released. In Pennington County the goal is to have all absentee ballots counted by 7pm on Election Day. Pennington County counts ballots, but doesn't release numbers. Pennington County starts counting absentee ballots at 1:00p.m. on Election Day.

Joel Arends asked where Auditor's Office staff thought the problem was during this last election cycle. Street Master was identified as one problem. Odd and even addresses were a problem. Directional designations were an issue. For example: an address entered as 100 N. Main, would come back as 100 S. Main. That would change the precinct, and the office would have to manually change it back. It appeared to be a data collection system issue. The office had the Secretary of State run a report with voter addresses and once that report was returned to the Minnehaha County Auditor's Office we had to change a lot of things back.

Pennington County didn't have the conversion issues Minnehaha County did. Pennington County converted different data from a different system. Kea Warne advised the committee that B-PRO reported that the problems Minnehaha County had didn't show up with other counties. Other counties also put lots of resources onto this project. Union County put three people onto the conversion to Street Master. Lincoln County had their GIS person work on the project. The committee will hear from a B-PRO representative at a future meeting. Hopefully they will be able to provide more answers.

V. AT THIS TIME THE MEETING MOVED TO THE BALLOT COUNTING ROOM FOR A DEMONSTRATION.

Sue Roust asked what “sorts” Minnehaha County has on when running ballots. Staff advised ballots are sorted into one of three bins. Inappropriate ballots go to one bin and the machine does not stop counting. The machines don’t sort for over-votes or under-votes. Sue Roust indicated it shouldn’t sort for over votes. Julie Pearson told the group over-votes – votes for more than one candidate are allowed. There was a discussion about what Administrative Rules prohibit and allow for sorting of over and under votes. Over and under votes stop the process and have to go to the board. Pennington County only kicks out blank ballots. Under and over votes are counted. Kicking out votes slows the counting process. There was a question about how to filter for over votes. Bruce Danielson reported that from review board experience, a hesitation mark can look like an over-vote. Will a hesitation mark be counted as an over-vote? It won’t be counted that way in Pennington County.

Tests are run with all types of ballots on Election Night before the actual vote count begins. Administrative rules specify what type of test decks have to be run prior to the vote count. The checks are more sensitive with the 850 machines than with the 650’s. Minnehaha, Pennington and Brookings Counties all experienced problems with some ballot stamps in the wrong spot. In Minnehaha County a total of 600 ballots had to be recreated.

Mike Hoverstat with ES & S described the evolution of the technology in ballot scanners. Prior versions of ballot readers used an infrared scanner. Current technology uses what’s called a visible light scanner. With the new visible light scanners, the machines will pick up anything that isn’t written in green ink. The technology is a big improvement. The advice from the company, if you don’t want the ballot stamps to cause any problems, use green ink stamps. The company is considering marking a spot on the ballot that says, “mark stamp here.” Julie Pearson commented that if she had known green stamps wouldn’t cause a problem her office would have purchased that color. Pennington County provides pens at the polls - blue ballpoint pens. Replacing all election stamps in Minnehaha County with the green ink stamps recommended by E, S & S would cost about \$2,000.

Please add to minutes:

2 tests of the DS850 were prepared for this demonstration:

- The first DS850 ballot tabulator test processed the November 2014 Election test ballots properly.

- A second demonstration was prepared with samples of November 2014 Election tabulator rejections included. The DS850 failed to operate. When ES&S personnel were unable to restart the machine, the test was completed on the second DS850 tabulator. Results were examined by the panel and participants. (note a request for the error log made by Bruce Danielson)

Bruce Danielson commented that on election night in Minnehaha County one scanner shut down in the middle of the run and had to be restarted. He asked if it would it be possible to keep the old vote-counting machines as a back-up and use them if the new machines have problems? That's not possible. They use different technologies and operate in different ways. One uses zip drives one uses flash drives. The tabulators also use different technology for reading ballots.

THE COMMITTEE RETURNED TO THE COMMISSION MEETING ROOM FOR THE REMAINDER OF THE MEETING

VI. General Discussion of Ballot Counting Process & Location:

The discussion included alternative possible locations of the resolutions boards and absentee ballot counting process. Minnehaha County opens absentee ballots in the overflow section of the second floor of the Administration Building (on Election Day) until 7 p.m. then takes them downstairs to count. When thinking about layout of the vote counting process, Roust reminded the group this was a relatively small election.

Pearson suggested the Auditor's Office may need additional space in addition to what they currently have to accommodate all election-related activities. One suggestion is to place the ballot counting machines in the Commission Meeting Room on Election Day. One other suggestion is to lower the temperature and humidity in the counting room. That makes it easier to run the ballots through the machines. Ballots should also be separated between absentee ballots and polling station ballots when run through the counting machines. Absentee ballots always have more marks on them and take longer to run. It's important to have enough Resolution Boards to handle the volume of ballots that must be reviewed.

Bruce Danielson suggested one committee recommendation might be to design a ballot with one designated spot for the ballot stamp. Others might be not to sort for over and under votes and that the Auditor's Office should start counting absentee ballots (but not displaying totals) before 7pm on Election Day.

Pennington County had 12 Resolution Boards set up. Minnehaha County has between 3 and 4 boards set up during the vote-counting process. A total of 527 ballots had to be recreated in Minnehaha County.

There was a discussion of possible changes to the building layout and workspace on Election Night that could potentially help speed up the process. Julie Pearson suggested blocking off the hallway in the north end of the first floor Administration Building. Ballots could be opened in that location and delivered to the scanners – giving more room for the scanning process. This would require securing that section of hallway. Another suggestion was to put cameras in the scanning room and limiting public access.

There were a number of questions for E, S & S after the demonstration. One question involved the weight, brightness and grain of the paper ballot stock. All are specified according to the machine. The ballot stock requirement has been the same for many years. The firm that prints ballots does so for all counties in South Dakota. There was also a question of lint building up on the counting machines – and whether that might have anything to do with rejecting some ballots. E, S & S reported that no issues related to lint have ever come to their attention. There was a question of folds in the ballot, and if that can make a difference when it comes to processing ballots through the machines. That can make a difference, and the company offers ballots that are pre-scored to make them easier and neater to fold. The biggest issue related to folding is not to have a fold across a voting position. It also makes no difference if it's a short versus long ballot in terms of ease of reading the ballot. Staff indicated that folded ballots were not part of the problem in Minnehaha County. Again, it was discussed that it's best to have cool, dry conditions in the room where the ballot counting machines are located. There was a question of using pens versus pencils for filling out ballots. According to Administrative Rules, either can be used. E S & S prefers pens. Minnehaha County has always used E, S & S card stock.

VII. Review of Committee Website

Robert Wilson reviewed the committee website as it has was designed and built by the county IT department. Several changes were suggested and the committee directed Mr. Wilson to set the site live on the county website.

VIII. Opportunity for Public Comment:

Greg Ellis – Election Superintendent. His concern was that poll workers had to send many voters to other precincts. For that reason he hopes the county would look into consolidating precinct locations. He also wondered if vertical rather than horizontal ovals would help voter's better stay within the field. Is it possible to have the names in the poll books larger type to help make it easier for workers to read?

IX. Old Business

The Minnehaha County Auditor's Office received 1,991 calls on Election Day.

Bev Chase – Sioux Falls School District Election Specialist: By using E-Poll Books for the last several school elections, if a voter showed up at the wrong precinct, they could tell the voter where they had to go to vote.

X. New Business

Sue Roust commented that one of the functions of this committee will be to present a list of recommendations included in a final report. She already has six potential recommendations in mind.

There was also a request to put the Opportunity for Public Comment item near the top of the agenda.

XI. Adjournment

Meeting adjourned.