

# Minnehaha County Election Review Committee

January 23, 2015 Meeting

## Meeting Notes:

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

**I. Call to Order**

**II. Approval of Agenda**

Motion passed unanimously.

**III. Approval of Minutes from meeting on January 16, 2014.**

Due to time constraints, the minutes were not able to be completed and a motion to allow them to be presented at the February 6, 2015 meeting passed unanimously.

**IV. Opportunity for Public Comment**

Rebecca Dunn – former state legislator and city council candidate in the most recent election addressed the committee. When she was running for office she became concerned after two neighbors approached her and reported she wasn't on the ballot they used to vote. After the election additional people stopped her and told her similar stories. Ms. Dunn thanked the committee for meeting and looking at an issue that needs to be addressed. She hopes this restores confidence in the process that has been lost.

**V. Discussion of State's Attorney's Position on Timing of Ballot Processing & Counting**

Sue Roust shared with the committee that she had asked for a clarification from the Minnehaha County State's Attorney's Office at the last meeting. Julie Pearson indicated Pennington County always has a large number of absentee ballots due to Ellsworth AFB. They process absentee ballots over a two-day period beginning on the Monday before Election Day. At that point they start examining the ballot envelopes, looking for any issues that may be obvious. Tuesday morning the office starts opening and stamping ballots. By 1pm on Election Day they are scanning ballots. They don't total any ballots until authorized to do so by law. They keep absentee ballots separate. The Secretary of State's Office also knows when absentee ballot results come in from Pennington County to insure they aren't totaling votes early. The system works very well. In Pennington County between

25% -30% of ballots are absentee. That's about the same percentage for Minnehaha County. Both counties have lots of RV's that add to the total absentee voters. Absentee ballots are slower to process through the counting machines than ballots cast at the polling locations. That's one reason why Pennington County starts counting them early. Bruce Danielson asked if on Monday, election workers are only looking at the envelopes. In Pennington County, absentee ballots are sorted by date received in the office. A staff person verifies that the ballot can be opened on Tuesday. In Minnehaha County absentee ballots are organized alphabetically into two groups: ballots mailed in and ballots cast in-person. In Minnehaha County 1 style of ballot can be used for five different precincts. Sue Roust told the committee Minnehaha County differentiates ballots by style. By doing that they have to print 8 different ballots. If ballots were differentiated by precincts, there would be 20 different ballots. The reason to organize by style is to reduce the number of errors when handing or mailing out absentee ballots. Regardless, all ballots are counted the same way.

Sue Roust indicated it is acceptable and legal to run absentee ballots through the counting machines prior to the time vote totals can be displayed – so long as the ballot counting machine does not display results. This can be done if the Auditor feels he has enough staff to start counting and still maintain all other needed Election Day activities. Bruce Danielson indicated that in Minnehaha County the election staff was done sorting and organizing absentee ballots by 3p.m. on Election Day. He also asked Auditor Litz if he felt he could have started counting absentee ballots early.

Auditor Litz said he appreciates the information this committee is gathering. The office had about 80 workers on Election Night, but he's not sure if he would have the staff available to start counting ballots early this time. The office was extremely busy with the tasks already before them. One thing that kept them busy was the volume of voter questions. The office answered 1,191 election-related questions on Election Day. Auditor Litz indicated he would like to start counting ballots early on the next Election Day. Bruce Danielson pointed out there will be two elections before the next General Election.

Auditor Litz said he wouldn't speak for how the city or school district might operate their next election, but the next school board election might be small enough that they wouldn't be a great indication about how counting absentee ballots early might affect the speed at which ballots are counted following the next General Election.

Lorie Hogstad said she would be interested in helping if the Auditor's Office wanted to look at early counting for the 2016 Municipal/School Board election.

There was a discussion of specific functions and responsibilities on Election Night. For all elections, including school and city elections, Auditor's Office staff operates the ballot scanners. The office also brings on extra staff during absentee voting periods. Three people are assigned to the 850 voting machines during the actual ballot counting machines. Two people operate the scanners and a third runs ballots that need to be recreated to the resolutions board. In Pennington County people from other offices are used to operate the vote counting machines. Pennington County deputizes employees from the State's Attorney's Office and the Sheriff's Office and they work with Auditor's Office staff.

Minnehaha County has Information Technology employees help upload the data collected by the vote counting machines and stored on jump drives. IT assists with the actual transfer of that data to the Secretary of State's Office. Pennington County uses an Election Reporting Management (ERM) system to put that information together and upload it to the state. There is a portion of the state's software system that will be updated and streamlined. Currently there is some data that Pennington County must manually input. There is also spot checking that occurs during the process. At that point, if an error is found, all ballot totals for that particular batch must be re-counted. The ERM was part of this problem in Pennington County. The issue had to do with making the ballot totals match exactly from the numbers that were counted on the county level to the numbers that appeared as being reported from the county. The Secretary of State's Office indicates it has already addressed this issue.

## **VI. Discussion of Challenges & Opportunities of Utilizing Voting Centers in Minnehaha County**

Lorie Hogstad explained the City of Sioux Falls' history with voting centers. The city started using the voting centers in 2012. The Sioux Falls School District first used them in 2011. In 2011 the school district use of vote centers was part of a pilot program authorized by the legislature. The city and school district have partnered to use voting centers ever since. In 2014 the city and school district had 13 voting centers. For 2016 they will look to add a couple more. Both the city and school district commented that what they like most is that voters can go to any voting center and not have to be turned away because the voter may be at the wrong location. To effectively use voting centers, Lorie Hogstad said it is necessary to have

e-poll books as well. The biggest challenge with voting centers is ballot allocation. In 2014 there were six different ballot types, in 2016 nine different ballot types are anticipated. At the last vote center election there were staffers dedicated to running additional ballots to voting centers as they were needed. In the future when the city and school have more history to judge how many voters use particular voting centers, it should be easier to properly allocate the proper number of ballots to each center. Sue Roust asked what the overall cost was of voting centers compared to standard precincts. Lorie Hogstad indicated the costs were about the same. The city and school district hired about 100 fewer election workers, but had to print additional ballots. In addition to the cost, Lorie Hogstad indicated the city also sees value in the convenience for voters that voting centers provide.

Bev Chase, Elections Supervisor for the Sioux Falls School District addressed the committee. She indicated one of the most important benefits of voting centers is voter convenience. She thought that might be especially important for rural voters who may work a long distance from home. Voting Centers are being used in an increasing number of jurisdictions, including some large metropolitan areas like Saint Paul, Minnesota. Following elections the school district has also reached out for voter feedback about voting centers. The overwhelming response was that voters liked them. She reminded the committee that E-Poll books doesn't mean voters are voting electronically. They still get a paper ballot. In 2013 the city and school district agreed to standardize the voting center locations. Ms. Chase sees two main benefits with voting centers and E-Poll Books: 1) a voter is never turned away and; 2) it's nearly impossible for a voter to vote twice. Once a voter is recorded as casting a ballot, that information is uploaded to the entire system nearly instantaneously. If a voter tried to get a second ballot at a different location, the election worker would be alerted that the voter had already cast a ballot.

The school district has seen a reduction in costs by using vote centers and E-Poll Books. In 2010 the district hired 210 people to staff the election and paid rent to dozens of precinct polling locations. In 2012 the district hired less than 100 people and only rented 4 or 5 locations. Ms. Chase indicated the cost of the E-Poll Books is not insignificant, but they also last a long time. During the last election there was interest from around the world in the voting center concept. A group from Great Britain visited to watch the process. Bob Litz told the committee Ms. Chase was a resource for him as he has looked into voting centers and e-poll books in the past. With the school district and the city using voting centers and the county still using precincts, he felt it was going to be confusing for voters to switch back and forth

between the two. In comparison to the 13 voting centers for the last city/school election, the county had 68 precincts for the Primary Election and 71 for the General Election.

Mr. Litz also reviewed his process for identifying precinct locations and finding election workers during the most recent election. In March he began contacting potential precinct locations and election workers. Some locations need three workers, others need six. Turnout for the Primary Election in Minnehaha County was 13% and 50% for the General Election. The county ordered 50% ballot stock for the Primary Election and 100% for the General Election. The county also had 19 different ballot styles for the Primary Election and 8 for the General Election.

Marlene Sweeter, the Lincoln County Auditor was in attendance and was asked to briefly describe her office's election process. She said the office uses precincts, and the thought of switching to voting centers is "scary." The county has such a drastic difference in population between the north and south ends of the county, and preparing all locations for potentially high volumes of voters would be a daunting task. Sue Roust asked Ms. Sweeter if Lincoln County has voting locations in Sioux Falls. Lincoln County has six. The concern was raised that if voting centers were used for a county election, the number of ballots that would have to be printed and available at all locations would represent a large expense. Ms. Sweeter said her biggest concern about voting centers would be the issue of confusion for voters. Julie Pearson asked what the turnout was for the last elections that used voting centers and e-poll books. It was about 4% for the last school election and 33% for the last city election.

## **VII. Old Business**

Julie Pearson said Pennington County has between 20 and 45 different ballots for each election. With that number of ballots and the high levels of voter turnout in her county, she wouldn't know how to predict the number of ballots needed at each voting center. It would be a very difficult endeavor to plan for. The amount of ballots that would have to be printed would be massive. Currently, precinct workers and ballot stock are her office's biggest expense. Voting centers would make the cost of ballot stock significantly higher. Because of the size of Pennington County, she also couldn't get additional ballot stock out to all parts of the county in a timely manner if supplies ran low. If a precinct ran out of a needed ballot, they would have to extend voting time at the end of the evening by the amount of time individuals had to wait for a ballot. That would extend the overall timeframe for producing

election results. The bottom line is that voting centers would not be a viable option for Pennington County. Ms. Pearson said the e-poll books are used in Pennington County and save time for precinct workers despite not being equipped with an internet connection. Pennington County partners with the city and school for the June Primary Election. The costs are split and the turn-out is higher by doing it this way.

Bev Chase said the Sioux Falls School District has chosen not to partner with the County and hold their election on the June Primary Election Day because that race is extremely partisan. The district doesn't want to be part of such a partisan election. The school also likes to hold elections after school has released in the spring, but before families leave on vacation. That's why they usually hold their elections during the 3<sup>rd</sup> week of May. Ms. Chase said the school partners with other organizations whenever it's appropriate. She said doing whatever can be done to encourage larger voter participation is important. Generally older voters turn out in higher numbers. The challenge is increasing the numbers of younger voters. Minnehaha County Auditor Bob Litz said he would entertain any suggestion the school district or city had regarding additional ways the three organizations could partner for elections.

Lorie Hogstad reminded the committee that the Sioux Falls City Charter directs when the city will hold elections. Any effort to change that date would have to begin with the city's Charter Revision Committee. Suggestions for changes to the city's charter can come from a variety of sources, including concerned citizens and city councilors.

Citizen Rebecca Dunn addressed the Committee and said the bottom line for voters is simply the importance of receiving a clear message of where they need to go to cast a ballot. The simplest answer for the voter would be the ability to vote at one place for all elections.

Monte Watembach, Minnehaha County Information Technology Director asked if, with the city using voting centers, it would be possible that a voter might be required to vote at two different locations on the same day? The example was offered of a resident of both Lincoln County and the City of Sioux Falls, who also lives in the Harrisburg School district. Could that voter be required to vote in one location for the city election, and a different location for the county and school district election? Sue Roust said that situation has happened in the past. In the case she was thinking of, two tables were set up in the same physical location so the

voter didn't have to travel to different spots, but they did have to cast two separate ballots. It was discussed that the use of voting centers by some, but not all organizations, could cause additional confusion for voters.

The committee also discussed the response from E, E & S, the vote counting machine vender. The committee had asked for an explanation of why the 850's quit working during the demonstration at the last meeting. The answer was that the touch-screen control panel had to be re-calibrated. That was done shortly after the demonstration concluded. The vote-counting machine also shut down on Election Night. There was a request to look at the machine's internal Error Log File and see why the machine shut down both on Election Night and during the demonstration. When the machine shut down on Election Night it forced the Auditor's Office to re-run the ballots from one precinct.

**VIII. New Business**

**IX. Adjournment**