



Takoma Park City Council Meeting – January 25, 2017 Agenda Item 3

Work Session

Update from the Board of Elections (Election Synchronization)

Recommended Council Action

Discuss next steps

Context with Key Issues

By Resolution 2016-36, the City Council affirmed its intention to change the date of City Elections to coincide with state and federal general elections, if it is determined to be feasible and in the best interest of residents of Takoma Park.

In pursuit of the Council's intention, the City's Board of Elections has been exploring the possibility of conducting the City Election alongside Montgomery County at Takoma Park precincts on the day of the general election in 2018. This model has been successfully implemented in the Town of Ocean City, which conducts its elections alongside Worcester County at the Ocean City Convention Center.

The City made a formal request to the Montgomery County Board of Elections for shared polling places and subsequently presented the idea at the County Board meeting on September 19, 2016. At that time, the Board indicated that it would discuss the request at its January 2017 meeting. That meeting is scheduled for January 23, two days before the January 25 work session. By the time the Council holds its discussion on January 25, more information should be available.

Earlier this month, the City Clerk met with the County Election Director and her staff to learn what the expectations might be for sharing polling places and how we can coordinate with each other. As envisioned by the County, Election Day voting would need to take place in two separate rooms, with separate election staff, separate check in for voters, and so on. All this is subject to approval by the County Board and the State Board of Elections. It is not certain when a final decision will be made.

Since a charter amendment is required to change the election date, a draft charter amendment schedule is included in this agenda packet. It assumes a late February decision from the County and State.

At the work session, the City Board of Elections will also brief the Council on preliminary plans for the 2017 City Election.

Council Priority

Engaged, Responsive and Service-Oriented Government

Environmental Impact of Action

N/A

Prepared by: Jessie Carpenter, City Clerk

Approved by: Suzanne R. Ludlow, City Manager

Fiscal Impact of Action

To be determined.

Attachments and Links

Draft Charter Amendment Schedule

Observation of Ocean City's Election (November 8, 2016), prepared by Arthur David Olson

[Resolution 2016-36 Regarding Changing the Date of City Elections](#)

[Project Directory Page on Election Synchronization](#)

Prepared by: Jessie Carpenter, City Clerk

Approved by: Suzanne R. Ludlow, City Manager

CHARTER AMENDMENT SCHEDULE

First newspaper notice of Public Hearing
(Once a week for two successive weeks.)

Thursday, February 23, 2017 in the Montgomery County Edition Washington Post
Also advertise in the March edition of the Takoma Park Newsletter

Second newspaper notice of Public Hearing

Thursday, March 2, 2017 in the Montgomery County Edition Washington Post

Public Hearing on proposed Charter Amendment
(No sooner than 10 days after the second notice of public hearing.)

Wednesday, March 15, 2017

First Reading of Charter Amendment Resolution
(First reading can take place the same evening as the public hearing.)

Wednesday, March 22, 2017

Second Reading of Charter Amendment Resolution (No sooner than 14 days following the public hearing.)

Wednesday, April 5, 2017

Publication of Fair Summary of Charter Amendment
(Published four times - at weekly intervals - within a period of at least 40 days after the adoption of the resolution.)

Thursdays, April 13, April 20, April 27, May 4 in the Montgomery County Edition Washington Post
Also publish in the May edition of the Takoma Park Newsletter

Effective Date - The Charter Amendment becomes effective on the 50th day after passage of the Charter Amendment Resolution, unless a valid Petition for Referendum is received on or before the 40th day.

May 25, 2017

From: Arthur David Olson
Date: 11/22/2016
Re: Ocean City's side-by-side election

Background

Ocean City has a mayor who serves a two-year term and seven council members who serve four-year terms. Council terms are staggered; four seats were contested this year; three will be contested in two years. The mayor and all council members are elected at large. Council candidates are listed as a single group; voters vote for up to the number of seats being contested; the top finishers are the winners. Ballot questions are allowed; there were no ballot questions this year. Elections are overseen by a seven-member Board of Elections (BOE). As with Takoma Park, the election is nonpartisan; there is no primary. (To stress the nonpartisan nature: as I understand it, the mayor is an unaffiliated voter.)

The incumbent mayor ran for reelection; four incumbents and one non-incumbent ran for city council. The city charter does not provide for writens. One BOE member said that in the absence of contested offices or questions, no election would have been held.

Through and including 2010, Ocean City held its elections in even-numbered years, but in October; starting in 2012, it has held side-by-side elections with Worcester County.

Ocean City does not have early voting. I asked whether the city had a presence (for handing out absentee ballots) at the county's early voting this year; no one I spoke with indicated that there had been a presence.

Campaigning

Elections may or may not be bigger in Ocean City than in Takoma Park, but election signs certainly are. I spotted signs up to four-feet-by-six-feet on my walk from the bus station to my motel; businesses also devoted their electronic message boards to pitches for candidates. I asked whether these signs were new with synchronization; I was told they were a long-standing tradition.



Polling place

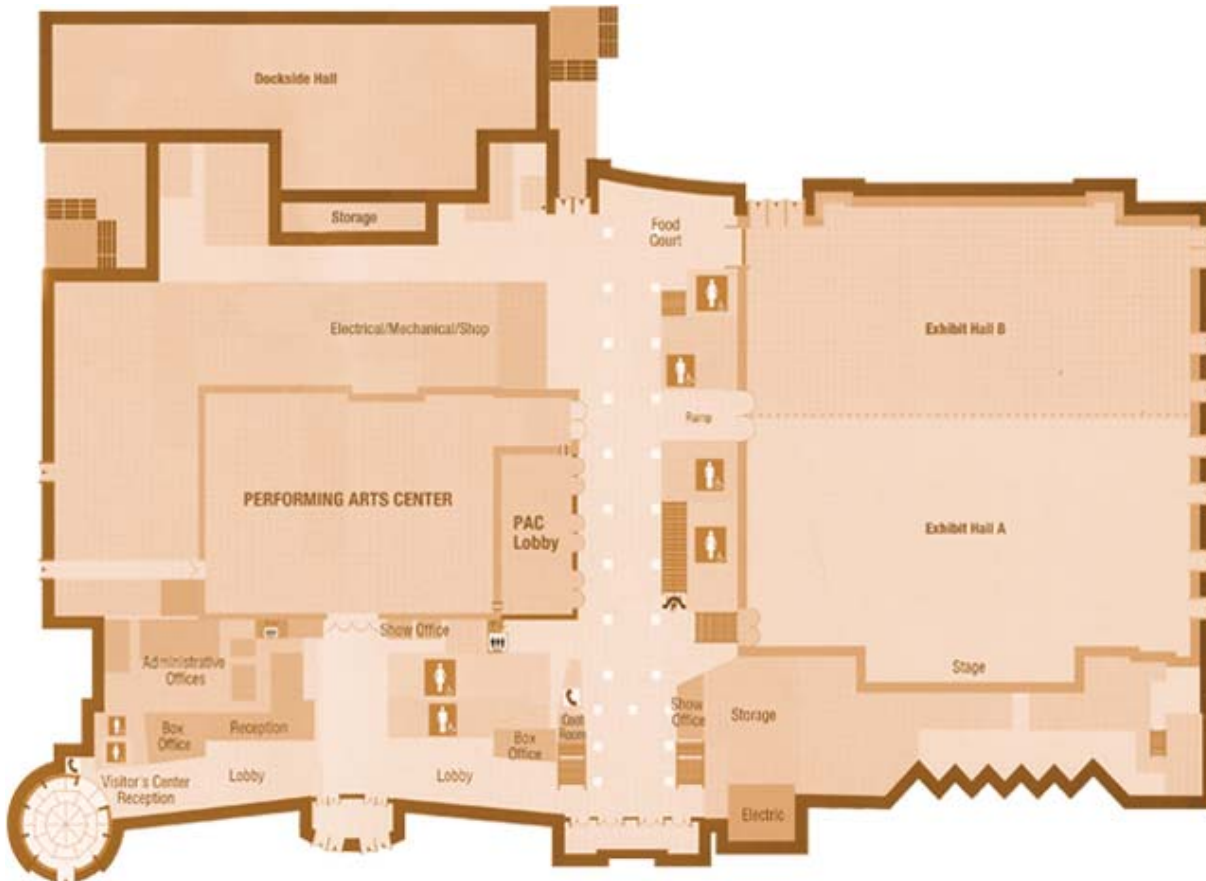
The election was held at the Roland E. Powell Convention Center. Ocean City owns the center, so it has absolutely no problem getting space there. (Takoma Park should be so lucky.)



The city and county elections are completely separate, conducted in different rooms: the frontmost Exhibit Hall A for the city; the rearmost Exhibit Hall B for the county. A sign on a flip chart near the entrance directed folks to the two different elections. The city election used less than half of Exhibit Hall A; stuff was concentrated near the rest rooms.

A single set of "no electioneering" signs sufficed for both polling places. I'd estimate that about 85% of the signs just outside the electioneering bubble were for city candidates, with the remainder for the county's election.

Even though the city was set up in front, from the "I voted" stickers I saw and voter responses I heard most (but not all) people voted in the county election first.



Personnel

For the 6:00 a.m. setup, the seven BOE members were present, as was a former city clerk, the current city clerk, the city manager, and the city web manager. The web manager worked on setting up the poll books. Once setup was finished, the city clerk, city manager, and city web manager departed, leaving the board and former city clerk—a crew of eight—to handle things during the day. A convention center staff person provided logistical support. The city clerk returned at 5:00 (see below); the city clerk's role in the election is smaller than that of Takoma Park's city clerk in our election.

Election workers were present for the entire day (as has been true in Takoma Park).

For much of the morning, five people handled checkin, two people handled actual voting, and one person (the board chair) handled unusual cases and directed arriving voters to checkin stations. The board chair was set up at a separate table.

Election workers are entitled to \$10/hour compensation. Sodas, water, and food were provided (doughnuts in the morning; lunch items from the convention center's food service in the afternoon; pizza in the evening). One BOE member said they'd been appalled to discover that food wasn't provided in the past and had pushed for food to be provided; Takoma Park folks may want to take note as we consider whether to end the practice of feeding election workers.

(Side note: evidently the county board of elections picked up doughnuts that the city board had ordered; one BOE member mentioned this as a sign that things do not always go smoothly between the city and county. Takoma Park is not alone in this regard.)

The ability of the board itself to do the bulk of the work certainly minimizes training requirements.

Election workers are badged; city staff show ID cards (as in Takoma Park).

Checkin

Voters entered by the door nearest to the stage.

Checkin was handled with poll books like those used by Montgomery County and Takoma Park. The poll books are owned by Ocean City; they were purchased from ES&S. Five poll books were used; all were interconnected via Ethernet. The cables were fairly short, so the poll books were set up near to one another; longer cables may be used in the future. Unlike Takoma Park, there wasn't a poll book set aside for lookups in unusual cases.

I was glad to see "Voted TOT 0" on the poll books at the start of the day.

Checkins were handled by single individuals rather than by teams of two. As with Takoma Park, no ID card was required to vote.

Ocean City checkin streamlining #1: folks were not routinely asked for the month and day-of-month of their birth; one board member told me that they would ask for these if an address was provided that didn't match the one in the poll book. Ocean City checkin streamlining #2: voters were not asked to check the information on their Voter Authorization Card (VAC) (although at least a few voters did do so unprompted). Ocean City checkin streamlining #3: board members did not initial the VACs. (One board member mentioned that workers had signed or initialed VACs in the past, but that the practice of doing so was dropped this year.)

Ocean City checkin slowdown #1: "I voted" stickers were issued at checkin (rather than after someone had voted).

Ocean City checkin slowdown #2: reminders to voters that a second election was going on and that they might want to go next door when finished with the city election.

(One Ocean City standout: big “I voted” stickers—circles about two inches in diameter. As in Takoma Park, stickers were liberally distributed to children and folks requesting multiples; I heard one checkin person refer to the “family pack” of stickers. My odd brainstorm: rather than a roll of stickers and a roll of plain paper for the VAC printer, have a roll of paper with stickers on the back.)



I timed a few checkins; they took about 45 seconds per voter. The number of workers handling checkin varied from one to five during the day, with fewer workers during meal times and when absentee ballots were being counted.

One BOE member’s interesting idea: an option to produce large-print VACs for folks who need them.

As with Takoma Park, any unusual cases (for example, someone not listed in the poll book) were moved out of the checkin line and handled by a specialist (for Ocean County, the BOE chair).

Most issuances of absentee ballots had been entered into the poll books; the roughly twenty that had arrived most recently were not in the poll books. Each person at checkin was given a list of the twenty relevant names and was instructed to ensure that those folks didn’t vote on election day. I don’t know whether the absentees could have been entered in while folks were checking in; a set-aside poll book would have been helpful for doing so if they could. I also don’t know whether there’ll be an after-election check of the twenty absentee names in the poll books to see whether they voted on election day.

Unusual cases

Ocean City has far fewer unusual cases than Takoma Park; qualifications for voting are the same as for the state of Maryland. The city does maintain a charter-mandated “supplemental voter list” for folks who do not want to register to vote in state elections (for example, folks who want to escape jury duty calls), but there are only two people on the supplemental list. For the day, only eight people ended up voting using a handwritten Voter Authorization Card; two of those were because of printer failures; six were because of poll book anomalies. The volume is low enough that I never heard use of the term “hand VAC” that I’ve heard in Takoma Park. (Nor did I hear “dust buster.”) We may want to share the form Takoma Park uses for these situations with our Ocean City cousins.

Ocean City does not have provisional voting.

Voting

Actual voting was on seven vintage lever voting machines, affectionately referred to by more than one board member as dinosaurs. The machines are over six feet tall, perhaps three feet wide and two feet deep. On seeing the machines, I asked how writeins were handled; I was told that the machines could handle them; it was then that I learned that the city charter does not provide for them.

Voters moved from the checkin area to the voting machine area, where a worker collected their VAC, escorted them to an available machine, and primed the machine using a mechanism on its side (resulting in a satisfying “chunk” sound). The voters closed the curtain, made their selections, then opened the curtain, all with mechanical gizmos. A flip chart directed voters to the exit (in the diagram, the door on the left side of the room farthest from the stage). Machine voting

was quick, taking a minute or two per voter. At busy times there might be a line with up to ten people for the voting machines, but for much of the day there was no line.

There were two rectangular metal containers (each a bit more than three feet tall and less than a foot on each side) where workers deposited collected VACs. It looked to me as if workers did not check VACs for a voter signature when they collected them; this is a potential streamlining for Takoma Park.

Anywhere from one to three workers minded the voting machines at different parts of the day.

I was surprised that the slots at the very tops of the machines were used for ballot choices; using lower slots might be of help to wheelchair users and others.

I failed to ask about provisions for voters with vision problems.

One BOE member mentioned that the person who maintains the voting machines is having more and more trouble finding parts; the dinosaurs may be extinct soon.

Absentees

At 5:00, the city clerk returned with absentee ballots. Several board members retired behind a curtain to count the ballots, identifying invalid ballots in the process.

In theory a Cone of Silence should have dropped on Exhibit Hall A at this point to prevent early disclosure of absentee results. I don't believe any results were disclosed, but the siren call of national election results (when polls closed at 7:00 in some states) was too strong for at least one election worker.

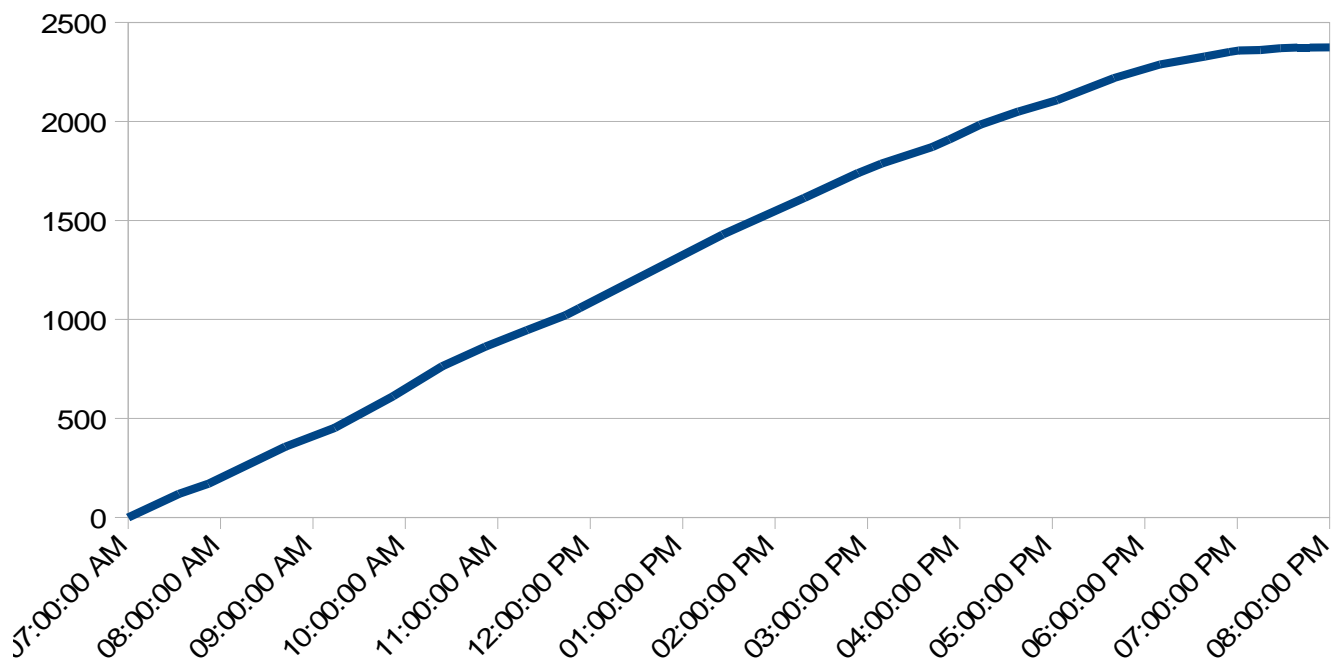
120 absentee ballots were issued; 106 were returned (of which one was judged invalid).

Pace of voting

There was a fairly steady stream of voters throughout the day, but things slowed in the evening (and especially after 7:00). I never saw more than twenty people in line; the city did substantially better than the county, where broken scanners in the morning led to a line of perhaps 100 people and a wait of up to 45 minutes to vote.

(So: a potential upside of side-by-side voting is that it can make Takoma Park look good if we provide a better voting experience than Montgomery County; a potential downside of side-by-side voting is that it can make Takoma Park look bad if we provide a worse experience.)

(And...I'm wondering if poll books can automatically provide data for chart of voter totals by time, rather than deriving it from reading the number from a poll book every now and then.)



Vote Count

At 8:00 p.m. the polls were closed, as was the polling place (to everyone except election officials). The voting machines were opened so that vote totals could be seen. For each machine, vote totals were read aloud first by one BOE member then by another; totals were written down on three oversized sheets by three BOE members. The totals for absentee ballots counted earlier were then announced and transcribed; at this time, all board members reviewed an absentee ballot that had been judged invalid and all concurred with that judgment. A tape adding machine was then used to generate tapes with grand totals; these were then reviewed by having one board member read the slips and another compare what they heard against the figures on the oversized sheets. The multiply-checked figures were then transcribed to two large (4-foot by 3-foot) sheets; each BOE member signed both sheets. Finally, figures for election-day voters (based on the poll book figure plus an adjustment for hand VACs), absentee voters, and total voters were computed.

(One missed opportunity: as machine vote totals were being read, the figure from each machine for the number of voters who used that machine might also have been read; the sum of these seven numbers could be checked against the poll-book-plus-hand-VAC total for agreement.)

Announcing results

Once totals were computed, the public was admitted; the BOE chair announced numbers of votes on a machine-by-machine basis, numbers of absentee votes, vote totals, and declared winners. The BOE chair invited folks to inspect the voting machines; no one took up this offer (but the offer explains why machine-by-machine numbers were announced). Results were announced a few minutes before 9:00 p.m.

The announcement of results is something of an event; one BOE member said that maintaining the ability to provide results quickly was what motivated Ocean City to have side-by-side elections rather than a unified election; the fear was that the county might put low priority on producing Ocean City results and that it might take days to get the results.

Note that the desire to announce results quickly is what motivates the early (and therefore necessarily private) count of absentee ballots.

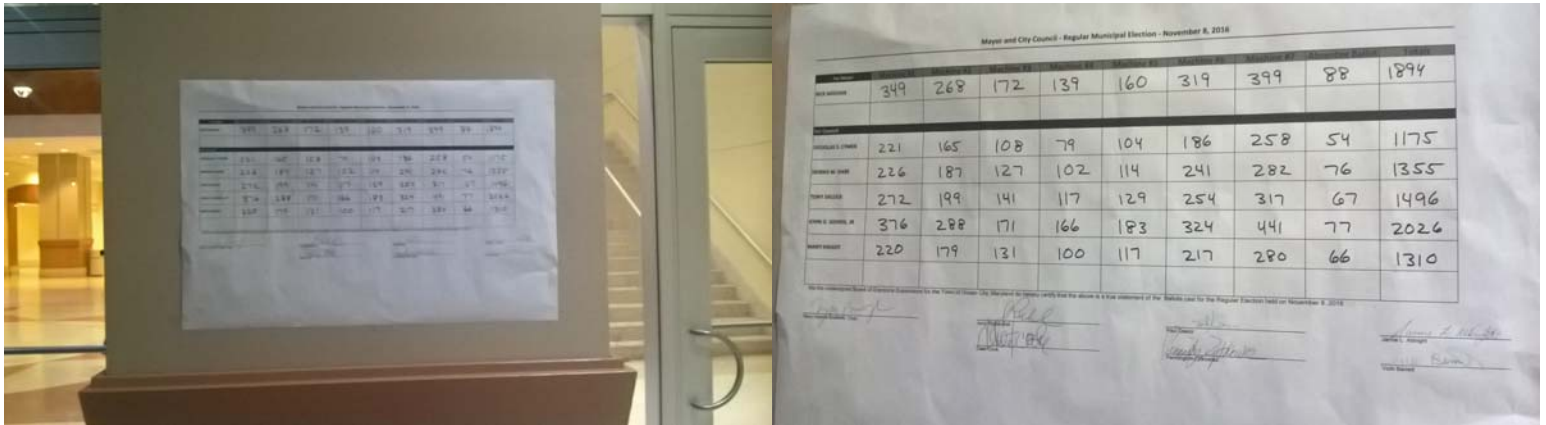
I failed to ask why the public is excluded between the polls closing and the announcement of results.



Board chair at microphone; other board members at and near table; Mayor Meehan at far right; voting machines in background.

Publishing results

The two four-foot-by-three-foot result sheets were posted, old school, behind a window of the convention center.



By the time I got back to Takoma Park, results had also been posted on the Interwebs:

<http://oceancitymd.gov/oc/departments/city-clerk/election/>

I did not see the city's web manager when the results were being counted and announced; I imagine that in future years there'll be a call for quick posting of the results on the Interwebs.

Closeout

The city clerk worked on packing up the poll books and equipment; BOE members handled shutting down and locking up voting machines.

After the election

I asked whether the board would be busy counting VACs on the day after the election; a board member told me that they were not routinely counted but were kept to allow for a count if need be. Skipping VAC count reconciliation may be a Takoma Park time saver.

Outcome

Ocean City ended up with 2,380 election-day voters and 106 absentee voters (with one absentee ballot judged invalid) for a total of 2,486 voters. The BOE chair told me that there were about 5,700 registered voters, making for a roughly 44% turnout (about double Takoma Park's 2015 turnout rate).

Incumbent Mayor Rick Meehan got 1,894 votes, which was 1,893 more than needed to stay in office. Vote totals for the five council candidates were: John Gehrig, Jr., 2,026 (more than the mayor); Tony DeLuca, 1,496; Dennis W. Ware, 1,355; Mary Knight, 1,310; Douglas S. Cymek, 1,175. Chamber of Commerce President John Gehrig, Jr. unseated Douglas S. Cymek from the council. (Takoma Park incumbents may want to be careful what they wish for.)

<http://www.delmarvanow.com/story/news/local/maryland/2016/11/08/chamber-president-john-gehrig-new-man-oc-council/93502436>

Open matters

I failed to resolve a procedural question: if people who are in line at 8:00 p.m. are supposed to be allowed to vote, should they be allowed to vote in both elections or just in the one for which they're in line?

And I failed to learn why it's called the seemingly redundant "Town of Ocean City."

Thanks

Ocean City staff and board members were welcoming and helpful to your disheveled correspondent; they shared food with me and informatively answered my questions big and small. I'm surprised to have learned more about conduct of elections in general than about conduct of side-by-side elections in particular; the help of Ocean City folks made for what to me was a valuable trip.

Diana Chavis and Mary A. Bradford kindly reviewed this report; their comments are attached with permission.

Mary A. Bradford, BOE chair

Jamie Albright, BOE

Amy Rothermel, BOE

Priscilla Pennington-Zytkowick, BOE

Debi Cook, BOE

Vicki Barrett, BOE

Paul Gasior, BOE

Diana Chavis, City Clerk

Carol Jacobs, former City Clerk

Good job on the OC election report! It gave me a good overview—much needed since it was my first municipal election as city clerk.

A few comments:

We do not have a presence during the national election early voting period; however, it may be considered in the future.

My role on Election Day is small, but the clerk provides a high level of administrative support leading up to that day, including but not limited to coordinating:

- the municipal election schedule and deadline dates for various aspects of the process;
- voting machine maintenance and ballot setup;
- food/beverage for board members and exhibit hall setup as detailed by board chairman;
- absentee ballot creation, distribution, tracking, receipt and assisting board with opening and counting absentee ballots;
- updating poll book software and voter registration data;
- ordering/providing supplies;
- advertising election and updating election webpage information.

Town Charter and Chapter 22 of town Code further details clerk responsibilities.

Voter data for those casting an absentee ballot is sent to the state, so they can be flagged as such in the poll books. There were some who obtained an absentee ballot after that submittal and, therefore, not listed on the final report as absentee ballot voter. A printout of those names was provided to board members. Using the poll book administrative card, I believe I could have changed the status in the system; however, there was simply no time to do so, and it would have required guidance from ES&S (poll book vendor) who did not have time to assist that day.

Those with vision problems would be escorted to the voting machine by whoever brought them and a board member.

After the absentee vote count, I was to remain with the election officials at the polling place and not allowed to leave the building.

I provided the webmaster with election results the next day, but plan to send an email that evening for more timely results posting.

Again, thank you for taking the time to attend and recap our election process. It was a pleasure meeting you.

Please reach out if I can be of further assistance.

Best regards—

Diana L. Chavis, City Clerk
Town of Ocean City
301 N. Baltimore Avenue
Ocean City, MD 21842
410-289-8842

I echo Diana's comments. The City Clerk does have a large role for election preparation as outlined below. A close working relationship must exist between the City Clerk and the Board. We have been fortunate through the years to have such a relationship.

I echo Diana's comments on assisting visually impaired voters. As stated, most visually impaired voters come with someone to assist them. Those who don't are assisted by those working the machines. One—or two workers if requested—enter the booth with the person.

We do instruct all board members who count the Absentee Ballots not to disclose the results of their count. On many occasions the polls have actually closed and we have waited for the absentee ballots to be counted to give results. We review these rules at our board meeting prior to the election.

It was interesting to note this year that our mechanical machines were more accepted and deemed tamper proof rather than put down as dinosaurs. I believe the "hype" about tampering with computers in the voting process in the news led to the feeling of vote security with these older machines. The growing difficulty in finding parts may become problematic as discussed in your report.

Thank you for sharing your report with us. I hope we were able to be of assistance.

Mary Adeline Bradford