

COUNTY OF JEFFERSON
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To: Jefferson County legislators and County Administrator Robert Hagemann

From: Commissioners Hall and Seymour

Date: Jan. 22, 2018

Re: 2017 Annual Report to the County Legislature in compliance with NYS Election Law §3-212(4)

If the 2016 election was hysteria, then this past year was a welcomed reversion to the mean.

The Board of Elections conducted three elections in 2017: a nonpartisan city primary for two council seats; local party primaries in Alexandria, Antwerp, Champion, Henderson, Hounsfield, Lorraine, Theresa and the city of Watertown; and a general election.

We held the nonpartisan city primary as well as the Republican, Conservative and Independence primaries for city court judge simultaneously, which presented a unique challenge. Recognizing that, the Board provided additional training for 30 city inspectors about how to run two separate elections at the same time in the same place.

The elections – both within the city and outside – ran smoothly, with a single exception. State Election Law required us to move one of our poll sites in Champion because a person controlling the building was also a candidate on the ballot. In our effort to reduce confusion and travel, we moved it to a nearby grange. While that location passed a Department of Justice survey regarding accessibility, we learned firsthand from a disabled voter that our efforts were insufficient.

We made the difficult, but necessary, choice to move the poll site in Champion to the high school. While it undoubtedly a longer drive for some voters, the school's location alleviated all of our concerns about accessibility. It is also a well-known spot, which helped reduce confusion

about the change. We were pleased that, on general election day, we did not receive a single complaint from a Champion voter in regards to the poll site change.

While just one out of every three voters participated in the general election countywide, we had turnout that exceeded even our expectations in Redwood and Theresa. The state contract price is 48 cents per ballot. We rely on historical data to make an educated guess regarding turnout so we order enough, but not too much.

Voter interest in late-breaking write-in candidacies, which are almost impossible to predict, have always driven ballot shortages. We are thankful that voters in Jefferson County are patient when we run out of ballots, but we will not rely on that goodwill. We will continue to tweak our formula and procedure so we never leave another poll site shorthanded (without breaking the bank).

Speaking of budgets: This will be the ninth consecutive year our office has spent less than it was allotted. We put a lot of effort into determining the correct amount to ask for each budget line. Even though we are a small department, we are invested in “holding the line” as much as possible.

There will be a time where we will have to begin a serious discussion about replacing our now 10-year-old voting machines. Our technicians are doing yeoman’s work in keeping our 90 machines in good order. While the federal government provided funds to purchase these machines, we do not anticipate any state or federal monies being offered for Round 2.

At this point, we have almost exhausted our federal HAVA funds. The grant recently covered our purchase of Clear Ballot’s absentee counting and auditing software. We used the absentee tabulator for the first time during the general election, which was a success. It was both more efficient and reduced the amount of human error in the recanvassing process. That should give voters even more faith in the results.

Let’s look ahead to this year. With the state Legislature’s two houses still divided regarding the appropriate date for a combined federal, state and local primary, county Boards of Elections will again run them separately (as we have since in even years since 2012).

The federal primary will be held June 26, with the state primary scheduled for Sept. 11 – although that may change. The general election is Nov. 6.

During the 2017 annual review, we mentioned Attorney General Eric Schneiderman’s proposals to reform and modernize voting practices. Governor Cuomo has adopted some of the attorney general’s proposals as his own, including early voting and same-day voting registration.

While Cuomo’s budget staff believes it would take \$6.4 million to implement early voting statewide, the governor did not include funding in his 2018-19 budget proposal. While it seems unlikely that the Legislature ultimately adopts either initiative this year – especially since same-day registration would require a constitutional amendment – we are troubled that this is looking like a future unfunded mandate.

We will continue to monitor that situation and discuss it with our elected state representatives if necessary.

The governor is also a big proponent of shared services, which we will continue this year. We helped the Alexandria, Carthage, General Brown, Indian River, Thousand Islands and Watertown school districts by programming our machines and deploying them for their May budget votes. This saved them the cost of purchasing \$11,000 machines and hiring technicians to create their ballots and test their machines. We bill the schools for any costs we incur, so it has no fiscal impact on the county taxpayer. The schools end up paying a mere fraction of what they would have had they opted to purchase machines. The Jefferson-Lewis BOCES has already reached out to us to assist them in their March capital vote, which we will begin organizing this week.