

COUNTY OF JEFFERSON
BOARD OF ELECTIONS

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To: Jefferson County legislators and County Administrator Robert Hagemann

From: Commissioners Hall and Seymour

Date: Feb. 1, 2021

Re: 2020 Annual Report to the County Legislature in compliance with NYS Election Law §3-212(4)

We doubt there will ever again be elections quite like those in 2020.

The confluence of a presidential election year with a pandemic resulted in an oftentimes chaotic, regularly stressful, but ultimately successful year for the Jefferson County Board of Elections.

The first uptick in coronavirus cases statewide came during the partisan petition-passing period, during which neighbors were soliciting each other to help their candidates obtain a ballot line. The state truncated that process to minimize stranger-to-stranger contact, which had a cascading effect on our political calendar.

Everything, we would soon learn, was subject to revision at a moment's notice. The state elections commissioners cancelled the Democratic presidential primary, but a candidate successfully sued to have it restored. Our entire staff worked steadfastly from behind to prepare ourselves for a county-wide deployment on June 23.

Gov. Cuomo increased the degree of difficulty when he ordered election boards to issue absentee ballot applications to all eligible voters and provide pre-paid postage return envelopes. We accomplish nothing, especially time sensitive matters, without help. We leaned heavily on our deputy county administrator, our Purchasing Department, our IT staff, our Building & Grounds

team, our mail department, our auditors and treasury staff for advice and assistance. Our success is due, in large part, to their willingness to help us in our hours of need.

New York has always emphasized voting in person, so the sudden – but necessary – shift to expanding absentee options had us rethinking the way we do business. We invested grant money into a scanner that could read absentee ballots faster, anticipating a huge uptick in voting by mail. By election, three Jefferson County residents had voted by mail for every one that showed up in person.

Babette Hall, who had served Jefferson County voters for nearly 25 years, retired in July and Michelle LaFave, her deputy, was appointed to the top spot. We spent most of the summer at Jefferson Community College's Sturtz Amphitheater, teaching our inspectors about the "new normal" – conducting elections in the COVID era.

The governor continued to surprise us. He gave us two weeks to mail all 56,000 of our voters a letter informing of them of their options for the general election. Again, we relied on our partners in county government to make the seemingly impossible possible.

In October, the Center for Tech and Civic Life granted us \$60,921, which we used primarily toward making poll sites healthier and making our absentee counting more efficient. The addition of temporary staff made a considerable difference in helping us remain afloat amid a tsunami of executive orders and legislation.

Early voting, in just its second year, was a popular alternative. We saw about 10 percent of our total voters in that nine-day period. Overall, our turnout – mail, early and in-person on Election Day – exceeded participation by about 5 percent in comparison to 2016.

The state Legislature continues to pass a flurry of elections bills. Some are designed to address system flaws exposed during the hectic prior election. Others continue the Democratic majority's priorities of reducing barriers to voting.

We again anticipate administering a June primary for village, town and city of Watertown seats. Like last year's election, there will likely be a greater emphasis on mail. Regardless, we will be doing our part to limit the spread of illnesses at our 43 poll sites.

Long term, our voting machines are now 13 years old and are all still in service thanks to our diligent technicians and a robust service contract with our vendor. While the Elections Commissioners Association have advocated for the state to supply funds for machine replacements, that has not been a legislative priority.

The presidential election put our organization – and those like ours – under a microscope, and the spread of misinformation was disheartening. We pride ourselves on being transparent with voters and taxpayers, and we are happy to answer any questions you may have about the administration of elections in Jefferson County.