

Buncombe County Board of Elections
Asheville/Buncombe County Board of Elections

Monitor Name: Elaine and George Elam plus Cheryl Williams in person

Date & Time: April 23, 2024 3:30 PM

Names of Board Members Attending:

Jake Quinn, Chairman

Mary Ann Braine, Board Member

Steven Aceto, Board Member

Glen Shults, Secretary

Sally Stein: Board Member

Names of Buncombe Co Staff Attending: Corrine Duncan, Director; Devin Whitney, Elections Technical Specialist; Justin Tate, Absentee Coordinator; Anna Katherine Moore, Administrative Coordinator and Clerk to the Board; Bria Bailey, Elections Technical Specialist; Neggy Fox, Deputy Director; Victoria Pickens, Accounting Technician and Campaign Finance

Location of Meeting: 59 Woodfin Place, Asheville NC

Observers:

8 observers as follows: 2 Republicans, 2 Democrats, 3 LWVAB, 1 Common Cause. At least 3 online.

Agenda Items

I. Agenda for this meeting approved by acclamation

II. Minutes (G.S. § 143-318.10) – for the April 16 meeting approved by acclamation.

III. Office Updates – Corrine Duncan

- Training for Election Day workers going on now
- Training for Early Voting workers finished last week
- Staff held a successful mock election on April 11 that was not open to the public
- In person Early Voting starts tomorrow, April 25.
 - Weekdays hours are 8-5 and 8-3 on last Saturday.
- The portal to collect public input on Early Voting for November 2024 is open at <https://engage.buncombecounty.org/2024earlyvotingplan>,
- Ms. Duncan held 2 outreach efforts
 - Sunday, April 21 at the Western NC Nature Center was the very early Get out and Goat 5K event - it was rainy and cool
 - Choctaw Street cleanup; Elections staff adopted the street because it was close to their former office location on McDowell Street

IV Discussion of FY 25 Budget - Victoria Pickens

- Time line of discussions:
 - 12/12 first presentation to Board of Elections (BOE)
 - 1/22 first presentation to Assistant County Manager (ACM) and Budget Director
 - 1/30 second presentation to BOE
 - 2/12 second presentation to ACM and Budget Director
 - 2/29 first presentation to County Manager
 - 5/21 present recommended budget to ACM
 - 6/18 County Commissioners vote on budget which has to be done before July 1
- She is there to answer questions
 - Ms. Stein asked whether this is an updated version of the budget we saw earlier? – Yes
 - Ms. Stein asked about the increase in contracted services. Ms. Duncan said that is the biggest line item which is the seasonal staff and bigger elections require a larger staff.
 - Mr. Shults asked whether the increase included the pay raise. Ms. Pickens and Ms. Duncan said the raise was for early voting poll workers not office staff.
 - Mr. Shults asked what is included in the absentee for mail contract services. Ms. Pickens said it includes MAT team members that go out to facilities, inhouse staff, and funds for ballot duplication in the Board meetings.
 - Mr. Shults asked why early voting printing in FY 25 increased by \$36,000 over costs in FY 23. Ms. Pickens said that since that time, staff moved ballot costs from another line item. Ms. Duncan added that we had a fair amount of Express Vote ballot stock left over from FY 23.
 - Mr. Shults asked why mail management for office operations increased by \$27,000. Ms. Pickens said that was due to the need for another countywide mailing for the school board.
 - Ms. Stein asked about the \$5,100 increase under Election Day telephones, were more needed? Ms. Pickens said the FY 23 funds were erased because they had issues with the land line services and the vendor gave them a refund which zeroed out the account for FY 23, but expenses will be incurred for FY 25.
 - Ms. Braine asked what is included in professional services. Ms. Pickens said it included equipment deliveries for Early Voting and Election Day, computer rentals, building upgrades, warehouse costs, cleaning, court reporter services if needed, parking and traffic control on Election night, ballot coding, ballot layout, ballot printing, audio for Express Vote machines, and location rentals.
 - Ms. Stein asked whether it was safe to assume most modest increases are due to the much larger election in FY 25. Ms. Pickens said yes.

- A question from the audience asked whether handouts were included when the minutes are posted. Mr. Quinn did not think so. Another observer pointed out that the County has a document request portal people can use to request documents.
- Ms. Duncan said that other departments had been asked to cut their budgets but Elections Services has not.
 - Ms. Stein asked whether funds had been earmarked in case reductions were needed. Ms. Duncan asked whether she meant the contingency funds. Ms. Stein said yes. Ms. Duncan said those have been distributed as needed. For example, they removed/reduced funds for items such as the quasi-judicial court reporting, building equipment and maintenance, and voting location rentals. All reductions are documented for the County in case additional funds are needed.
- Ms. Baine asked whether they had ever had to ask the County for more funding and whether that causes trouble. Ms. Duncan said they have never had to ask for more funding before but might have to this year because it is going to be close. But County officials have always been receptive and supportive.
 - Mr. Quinn noted that any request would be related to the second primary and would likely be modest.
 - He went on to say that Ms. Duncan’s predecessor had established a very high standard that inspired confidence the in process the office uses and that Ms. Duncan had continued in that vein.
- An observer asked about the use of paper stock and excess inventories. Ms. Duncan said the paper was specialized and needed to be stored properly but it was reused as needed. For example, left over blank paper stock could be used for absentee by mail ballots in subsequent elections. She also noted that paper stock for the Express Vote machine cost about half as much as traditional hand marked ballot stock. Also to reduce waste they use a consistent ballot size whereas in the past they had changed ballot size which created waste.

**V. Election Week Schedule (G.S. § 163.234(2), SL: 2023-140, Sec 15)-
Corrine Duncan**

- Ms. Duncan said that two changes to the schedule for the second primary need to be made to meet changes mandated by two recent laws:
 - First, we wanted to hold our election day meeting at 6 pm because we only have one early voting site but the new law says the meeting must be held between 2 and 5 pm, so staff are suggesting the meeting be at 5 PM for absentee ballots, but not challenges, on May 14.
 - Second, the late Friday meeting that no one likes can be replaced by a meeting at 3:30 on the Friday after the election, May 17, to enter any challenges that have been received. The reason to have the meeting on Friday is that the new deadline for challenges is the fifth business day

after challenges or May 21. The Friday meeting allows any challenges received by then to be processed in a timely manner. Tues May 21 is the actual deadline for challenges so if they reserve a time but receive no challenges, the meeting can be cancelled.

- The motion to approve the changes suggested by staff was approved 5/0.

VI. Present Early Voting Plan for the 2024 General Election (GS § 163-166.35, SL 2023-140) – Neggy Fox

Ms. Fox presented slides related to the plan that are supplemented by maps and materials she passed out.

- The General Election has not changed but State Board changed the date counties need to prepare their plans from August to May 7.
- Yesterday, April 22, the portal for public input on the plan went public
- At the April 30 Board meeting, staff will present preliminary public input
 - The survey questions were sent to Board members on Friday, April 19
- The survey closes Friday, May 3 at 5 PM
- May 7, staff will present the plan for final review and a Board Vote
 - The Public may attend the meeting and make oral statements
- This is the process that would have been followed over the summer if the deadline had not been changed.
 - Ms. Fox gave a shout out to the efforts of the outreach and communications team that very quickly developed the website, established the links, sent out the press releases, posted the survey on the website, and everything else needed to make this happen.
- The mandates for the General Election Early Voting are:
 - Oct 17 to Nov 2
 - Weekday hours are 8 AM to 7:30 PM
 - Hours for the last Saturday before the Election are 8 AM to 3 PM
 - All sites must use the same hours and days of operation
- The discretionary items are:
 - The number of Early Voting sites and
 - The weekend hours of operation
 - The Board's vote must be unanimous or the question will be forwarded to the State Board of Elections to decide
- Considerations for site selection include
 - Historical data on:
 - The number of sites, currently 14 are in the budget
 - Data on voter turnout,
 - Numbers of registered voters
 - Site suitability, including:
 - ADA compliant
 - Parking
 - Convenience to voters

- Square footage
 - Stability – a site that can be used year after year that voters can rely on, moving sites around has not been successful
 - Work within our budget
 - Sustainability
- Other factors, such as:
 - Capacity of staff and facilities
 - Equipment availability - we only have so many machines and scanners
 - Current laws
 - Numbered Memos
 - Public Input – this is the third year of gathering public input
- She presented a color-coded map prepared by Devin Whitney to show where people live and where they voted in the Presidential Election of 2020
 - Places like the Asheville Outlet mall pulled in nearby voters but not necessarily voters from Black Mountain or Weaverville
 - The map is not online but can be requested through the document request portal
 - Most of the sites on the map will be used again although a few will be replaced
 - Outer sites, such as Sandy Mush, do not have major highways and have a low population, so it does not make fiscal sense to have an Early Voting site there
 - We have had early voting sites at places like Upper Hominy Fire and Rescue (2012) and Avery Creek, both had low turnout
 - The Enka Candler is exploding but has few public facilities such as libraries or retail space. As a result, the Early Voting sites would have to be in Fire Departments or schools to have the square footage, parking, and ADA compliance that we need.
 - Barnardsville area is not regularly used as an Early Voting sites. We have tried Jupiter but the turnout was low. However, the Big Ivy Community Center is a possible site.
 - Mr. Quinn said this showed us how people travel to vote.
 - Mr. Aceto commented that blank areas in this map show up with higher numbers of votes on Election Day
 - The blank areas are limited access regarding roads and are in the higher elevations
 - Another precinct that chooses to vote on Election Day is Biltmore Forest which is close in
 - Mr. Aceto questioned if we know whether voters in these locations would use an Early Voting site if they had it
 - Mr. Quinn said that is a key question and he hopes the public input portal will elicit information on this

- There ensued a detailed discussion of how to obtain insight on this question of whether voters are underserved in these areas or whether our plan adequately serves everyone
- Mr. Aceto also said that the blank areas correspond to rural Republican areas and the dense areas correspond to urban/suburban Democratic areas
- Mr. Quinn reiterated his hope that people, especially from these areas, will share their views
- He further noted that a key performance metric is voter turnout
 - Mr. Aceto said integrity is the other key tower of our operations and neither can exist alone
- Mr. Shults asked what sites near Candler and north of Weaverville that have been used
 - Near Candler we used Pole Creek, Avery Creek, and New Morgan Hill Baptist Church (which now has another name)
 - Jupiter is near Weaverville although Big Ivy Community Center was considered but not used for budgetary reasons.
- Ms. Duncan said that Early Voting sites work best when they are available to many voters and when they are convenient for voters
 - Even without more information on the low population areas, we still have to make decisions
 - Big Ivy Community Center would probably be welcomed as an Early Voting site
 - Most of the area around Candler, which is designated a high-growth area, is residential which means we would need to use fire departments which are never happy to have voting going on for 17 days although we haven't reached out to them
- Ms. Stein noted that trends in Early Voting are increasing, so how do we plan going forward 10 – 12 years.
 - Ms. Duncan said the 2020 election was the highest turnout ever and the highest use of Early Voting
 - Mr. Quinn said the turnout was over 78 percent, the most ever which says something is working even though we'd like to have a greater turnout this year, so he is cautiously optimistic about how the Early Voting plan is viewed by voters
 - In 2020 absentee by mail was 22 percent of votes which is not likely to be repeated

- Early voting was 65 percent which reflects the trend for general elections while Early Voting in primaries is still about 50/50
 - Election Day voting in 2020 as about 12 percent
 - Mr. Quinn said they had 16 sites in 2020 to because of the pandemic
- Next Ms. Fox presented a slide of Early Voting turnout trends that Ms. Duncan prepares every year
 - It shows that the trend lines during the Early Voting period over several elections. They start high for the first few days, then dip over the weekend, rebound in the first days of the following week, dip again over the weekend, and rebound right before Election Day
 - Ms. Duncan reminded people that the orange line was 2020 which saw record turnout and that the trend lines are the opposite of the trends for Primary Elections.
- In summary, Ms. Fox said the plan currently contains 13 Early Voting sites, open on two Saturdays (Oct 19 and 26) and one Sunday (Oct 27)
 - Weekend hours would be from 8 AM to 3 PM to allow for a single shift of workers
 - Being closed the first Sun allows staff to catch their breath and for staff to make any needed adjustments and all auditing requirements going well
 - The 13 sites are: Bee Tree Fire Station in Swannanoa; Black Mountain Library; East Asheville Library; Enka-Candler Library; Fairview Library; Friendship Center in Asheville; Leicester Community Center; North Asheville Location as yet to be decided; South Buncombe Library; UNC-Asheville although the specific location within campus to be determined; Weaverville Community Center; Wesley Grant Southside Center (in lieu of BOE); and West Asheville Library
 - All but two of the sites are confirmed and have been used before
 - The Inclement Weather policy will be the same as for the primary
 - If County Offices/Libraries close or delay opening, the Early Voting sites will too as the Board approved by resolution for the Primary
 - The Elections Staff will be responsible for notifying workers and the public
 - If partial closures are required, such as on the one Sunday when most county offices/libraries are closed, the Board would need to meet to decide how to proceed
 - The Early Voting plan and survey are at <https://engage.buncombecounty.org/2024earlyvotingplan>
- Ms. Braine asked that a different color should be used to distinguish the voters at UNCA from voters at the Asheville Mall because the colors on the current map are too close for her to distinguish

- She also said that the data are insufficient to address the question of whether people would use an Early Voting if it were available, especially since sites such as Pole Creek were only used only once or twice. All voters have the option of voting early but may not have an Early Voting site close by. Ms. Fox said the Pole Creek Church site was eliminated for lack of ADA compliance
 - Murphy/Oakley was not used again because the East Asheville library, a superior site, was completed
 - Montford was used while it was in transition to North Star Academy
- Mr. Shults asked whether there was money in the budget for one or more sites
 - Ms. Fox said staff budgeted for 14
 - Mr. Quinn said we often budget for X but open X+1 without negative budget impacts
- Mr. Aceto said he would like staff to consider in greater depth the potentially underserved areas previously discussed
- Mr. Quinn emphasized that a lot hinges on finding sites, especially for 2- and one-half weeks
 - People do not like voting in churches which is why we prefer public spaces
- Ms. Duncan said churches, schools, and fire departments have more security concerns than before and are increasingly reluctant to allow Early Voting which brings in a ton of people. Moreover, while the County is considering areas of growth, it is not committed to building sites that could be used for Early Voting or other community needs
- Mr. Quinn noted that we are using a 20th Century Voting model that is no longer universal with states opting for other methods such as all mail in voting
- Ms. Braine asked about Upper Hominy, which Ms. Fox said has not been used since 2012
- Ms. Stein asked how the word about the survey is getting out
 - Ms. Duncan said press releases have been released; she will discuss it at her media availability on Thursday; they contacted party chairs; posted information on their web site; sent it out over social media
 - Mr. Quinn said people are not as focused on the November Election now as they will be later but we have to work with the time we have. Moreover, the voting process is more streamlined and takes much less time
 - Ms. Duncan said that the Office has less flexibility in open hours than in the past when sites could be staggered in opening and hours of operation. The reduced flexibility has had an impact on the number of sites the County could open
 - Ms. Stein suggested housing complexes with club houses
 - Ms. Duncan said that would likely be expensive but could be looked at
 - Mr. Quinn and Mr. Aceto commented that Buncombe County has quite a few uninhabited areas, such as in the National Forests

- The observer from precinct 38.2 (near Fairview) said he had driven the precinct lines and was surprised at how many people had moved in. He further said he did not feel voters in that area were adequately served
- The observer from Common Cause said that the organization had looked at the data and found that voters in predominately Black neighborhoods, including where she used to live, did not have easy access to Early Voting sites because there is no public transportation or libraries and for people without cars it is too difficult to walk. She asked that the Board and staff consider adding sites to supplement the one at Wesley Grant Center, such as Harvest House, as well as using AB-Tech as a site to reach younger voters.
 - Mr. Quinn said AB-Tech has obtained approval for its student IDs as acceptable Photo ID for voting. However, as a voting site it was extremely disappointing with regard to turnout.
 - Ms. Fox also said that AB-Tech pulls lots of students from other counties
- Ms. Braine asked for a map that shows households with registered voters which might show that the blank areas on the maps they have viewed are blank because no one lives there

VII. Absentee Ballot Review (GS §163-230.1(f)) – Justin Tate

Mr. Tate presented 17 mailed in civilian ballots with IDs that were recommended for approval

- The Board reviewed the ballots and all 17 were approved 5/0
- The ballots were scanned and placed in envelopes which members signed and sealed for storage. Similarly, the flash drive was placed in an envelope that was signed and sealed by members
- Mr. Tate said he had one mail in ballot awaiting a cure. He talked with the voter today and felt the ballot would be cured in the next few days

6 PM Moved to 50 Coxe Avenue

VIII. Early Voting and Election Day Machine Testing (08 NCAC 04.0307)

The Board reconvened at 6:45 PM at 50 Coxe Avenue with Board members, Ms. Duncan, Ms. Moore, and 3 observers (1 LWVAB and two others of unknown affiliation). The Board tested a minimum of 10 percent of the 80 tabulators in the warehouse. All tested machines returned results that matched the correct number of “ballots” in this simulation. The tapes were signed by the Board Members and secured for storage. The observer left at 8:00 PM when testing was complete and most materials secured.

IX. Next Meeting: Tuesday, April 30 at 3:30 pm

Location: 59 Woodfin Place