

Madison Election Advisory Committee Annual Report, 2006-07

Background

The Madison Election Advisory Committee (MEAC) was created in 2006 to evaluate current election procedures and make recommendations for improvement. More detailed information on the Committee's charge, membership and meeting schedule is provided in the appendix.

The ordinance creating the MEAC requires the group to prepare an annual report. However, it provides no guidance on its content. Therefore, the Committee decided that this first report would be most useful if it dealt with the entire election process including the many improvements made by the City Clerk during the past year.

In the next section, some election-related statistics are presented so that the reader can get a sense of the magnitude of the election process. Then the report lists recent improvements and changes in Madison's election administration, changes and improvements that are currently in progress, and finally, future challenges.

Election-Related Statistics

Elections are major undertakings and at least two elections (primary and general election) are usually held each year. During the period from 2000-2007, 26 elections were held in Madison. Turnout ranged from a low of 6,350 (4% turnout) in the February 2006 primary for school board candidates to a high of 138,450 (80% turnout) for the November 2004 presidential election. Similarly, the number of requests for absentee ballots has ranged from 1,030 for the February 2000 primary for Dane County supervisor to 25,260 for the November 2004 presidential election.

Voting places are geographically dispersed around the city. There were 76 polling places in Madison as of the spring 2007 election. Two additional sites have recently been added and two to three more are expected to be added prior to 2008. Each site must be equipped and staffed. The City Clerk's office schedules a minimum of five and a maximum of 14 election officials to work at a single polling place. Thus, elections typically require 500 – 1,000 poll workers (some poll workers stay for the whole day while others work a split shift.) In addition, the five staff members of the City Clerk's office are assisted by many other individuals from within city government (e.g., light-duty staff from Madison Metro, Parks, Traffic Engineering, Water Utility and other departments, employees from the Comptroller's Office) and outside (e.g., special registration deputies, Badger Cab drivers) who help to ensure a smoothly functioning election process.

Recent Changes and Improvements in Madison's Election Administration

Registration

- The City Clerk arranged with Local 60 unionized workers to process over 30,000 new registrations for the November 2006 elections. These records had to be entered during off hours, since the Statewide Voter Registration System (SVRS) was swamped during the day.

Poll Workers

- The City Clerk improved the process for the training of poll workers. This included revamping the Election Day manual, instructing poll workers in many significant changes in state law and forms, and better tailoring training sessions to the experience level of the poll worker.
- The City Clerk recruited and trained new chief inspectors for 25% of the polling places.
- A new Election Day phone system was introduced which allowed poll workers more direct access to city staff when there were questions or problems.
- The City Clerk collaborated with the Wisconsin League of Women Voters on a pilot project for poll worker recruitment. As part of this project, poll workers were surveyed.
- The City Clerk conducted debriefing sessions with staff and some chief inspectors.

Polling Places

- The City Clerk established a new location for storage of voting equipment in the Villager Mall which was more convenient and provided better security.
- The City Clerk surveyed all chief inspectors on possible improvements in polling places and equipment.

Others

- The City Clerk improved the security of absentee ballots while being transported from the office to the polling place.
- In collaboration with the UW-Madison and the Madison Public Schools, the City Clerk conducted extraordinary outreach to facilitate the casting of absentee ballots for the April 2007 election which was scheduled to be held during school holidays.
- The AutoMark ballot marking machines were introduced, and they must be tested, programmed and setup prior to each election. The City Clerk produced a movie on the use of the new AutoMark ballot marking machines which aid people with disabilities to fill out a ballot privately and independently.

Changes and Improvements in Progress

Polling Places

- Working with the appropriate Alder, the City Clerk established new polling places for 5 wards near or outside the beltline, where there has been significant population growth (Wards 4, 5, 18, 83, and 93). Alder Cnare has introduced a resolution to provide a new polling site for ward 5. Replacement sites are being sought for others such as the Midvale School, the Madison Ice Arena, the Dayton Street Fire Station, and Gates of Heaven.

Others

- The MEAC recommended elimination of Common Council meetings on the days of all regularly scheduled elections, in order that the clerk and her staff can concentrate their efforts on elections. This proposal will be implemented in 2008.
- On referral by the Common Council, the MEAC reviewed a proposed ordinance dealing with political activity by election officials. The Committee recommended an alternative approach – a new policy in the clerk's office – to address the issue. For further information, see Legistar.
- The front counter of the clerk's office is being remodeled to provide accessible counter space and improve workflow.
- The clerk's office ordered secure bags for transporting absentee ballots. They will be available for use in the 2008 elections.
- At the request of the MEAC, the City Clerk has prepared written debriefing materials following each election.

Future Challenges: Areas Identified for Future Improvement

Registration

- Proper completion of Election Day registration forms during November elections. Heavy volume results in incomplete or illegible forms which create problems in data entry.

Poll Workers

- Recruitment of a more heterogeneous group (e.g., age, ethnicity) of poll workers who enjoy working with people. In addition, chief inspectors need supervisory skills.

Polling Places

- Accessibility of polling places.
- Development of specific criteria for evaluating when new polling sites are needed or existing locations need to be replaced. At present, it appears that at least four polling places need to be relocated.
- Polling lists generated by the SVRS need to be complete. During the last election, the names of some registered voters were omitted from the list.

Others

- Need to recruit a deputy clerk.
- SVRS needs to be able to handle absentee ballots.
- Earlier receipt of mail each day so that absentee ballots can be processed in a timely fashion.
- Proper functioning of the AutoMark ballot assist terminal. Five machines had problems during the February elections and 18 malfunctioned in April.

This report was approved by the Madison Election Advisory Committee at its November 13, 2007 meeting.

Appendix

The MEAC was created in 2006 with the following charge:

- Evaluate current procedures for elections.
- Make recommendations for improvements in registration, polling places, voting equipment, election official training, ballots, absentee ballots and tabulating votes.
- Monitor elections for optimal and appropriate accuracy, convenience, fairness and legality.
- Evaluate and make recommendations on State and Federal law changes if they relate to elections.
- Recommend methods to maintain proper balance between the security of elections, openness of the process and the right to a secret ballot.
- Solicit public comments and recommendations.
- Forward an annual report to the Council, Mayor, or City Clerk.

The Committee consists of the following six appointed citizen members and two non-voting members, the City Clerk and the County Clerk.

Sybil Better, Chair

Valerie Brown

Marlena Deutsch, Vice-Chair

Paul Malischke

Warren Onken

Emanuel Scarbrough

Bob Ohlsen (Ex-officio, non-voting)

Maribeth Witzel-Behl (Ex-officio, non-voting)

In addition, Enis Ragland represented the Mayor's office until he moved to his new position. Janet Piraino now serves as the liaison between the Mayor's office and the MEAC.

The Committee held its initial organizational meeting in late August 2006. Because the City and County Clerks were heavily involved with election-related activities during that fall, the group's subsequent meeting was delayed until December 2006. Since that time, the Committee has met regularly for a total of 9 meetings during the period from August 2006 – September 2007.