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Getting to Know the Election Process

As many of you may already know, the City of Cleveland recently held an election to decide if the local sales tax would be raised from 9.25% to 9.75%. This election was held only for the registered voters within the city limits. The county opted not to participate; therefore, county residents were not eligible to vote. Since this was a fairly minor election, *The People News* decided to take advantage of the rights of the press under TCA § 2-7-103a which states: No person may be admitted to a polling place while the procedures required by this chapter are being carried out except election officials, voters, persons properly assisting voters, the press, poll watchers appointed and others bearing written authorization from the county election commission.

The People News simply observed the election process from the press' point of view to give our readers a little insight into a segment of local government. Some may think the process is simple, but an election is actually very complex. A lot of work by the Bradley County Election Commission, under the administration on Fran Green and the election commissioners Mary Frances Armstrong, Chairwoman, Theba S. Hamilton, Secretary, and members Oscar S. Kelley, Dana C. Burgner, and Harlan R. White, goes in to making sure it runs smoothly. Of course, the registered voters do their part as well when going out to vote, otherwise there would be no election.

For this particular election, early voting began Wednesday February 18th and continued through March 5th at the election commission office, Bradley Square Mall, and Blythe-Bower Elementary School. Election Day was March 10th at the following precincts: Lee University, Senior Center, Cleveland Community Services, E.L. Ross, Stuart, Blythe-Bower and Prospect elementary schools and Cleveland High School.

However, before the elec-

tion could actually begin, the machines used to record the voter's ballots had to be properly programmed. The Bradley County Election Commission uses Micro Vote electronic voting machines which must first be programmed with the correct ballot and checked to make



Election supplies and voting machines delivered to Blythe-Bower

sure they are working correctly. The voting machines are then closed into a box similar to a large briefcase, locked, and sealed with a pre-numbered seal. These seals are put in place to identify the individual boxes and help to insure proper precinct



Absentee Board members Pam Mathews and Roxie Aulds

delivery. These seals are not to be broken until the day of the election. According to TCA § 2-7-107, the officer of elections shall deliver to the polling place on the day of the election the duplicate permanent registration records, paper ballots, sample ballots, voting machine keys, ballot boxes and keys, and all other supplies needed for the conduct of the election. In this instance, three voting machines along with other supplies needed for the election, were delivered to each precinct the day prior to early voting.

Once the voting machines' seals are broken and machines set up at the precincts to which they are delivered, the voting can begin. In order for a person to cast their vote, a vote card must first be inserted into the machine panel by a poll worker, which in turn activates the ballot for the voter. Once the voter makes their selection, the vote has been saved and stored within the electronic

voting machine until the machines are tallied. At the end of any given election day, the whole breakdown, lock, and seal process must be repeated for each individual machine.

According to TCA § 2-6-104c, the county election commission shall secure each voting machine used in early voting to prohibit tampering and shall also provide maximum security that allows no other person, except for persons designated by the election commission or the administrator of elections, to have access to the room or facility in which the voting machines, ballots and other election supplies are stored.

While the voting machines are the biggest key in casting ballots, there are still absentee votes that need to be gathered and later counted. The Absentee Board made up of Pam Mathews, Maxine Baker, Bettie Howard, Roxie Aulds, Gail Walker and Susie Ensley met in the county mayor's conference room to sort and count the absentee ballots received.

According to TCA § 2-6-311, absentee ballot boxes must have at least two (2) hasps for locks, and be equipped with baffles so that ballots cannot be removed without unlocking the box. (b) The ballot boxes shall be locked at the beginning of absentee voting with one (1) lock from a county election commissioner of one (1) party and another lock provided by a commissioner of another party. The com-



Administrator Fran Green Locks Absentee Ballot Box

missioners shall retain the keys personally. The boxes may not be unlocked except when the votes are to be counted. (c) In addition to the locks required in subsection

(b), the county election commission shall place two (2) numbered seals on each ballot box at the beginning of absentee voting with one (1) seal placed by a county election commissioner of each party. Such seal numbers shall be recorded by the administrator of elections and certified in duplicate by one (1) commissioner of each party, and the original shall be forwarded by mail immediately to the office of the coordinator of elections and the duplicate shall be filed in the election commission office. The seals may not be broken except when the votes are to be counted. If a seal or seals are broken, the administrator shall immediately attach new numbered seals and certify in writing to the coordinator of elections the numbers and a description of the circumstances necessitating this action.

According to TCA § 2-6-304c, the board members then open the sealed absentee ballot envelopes, remove the absentee ballots and count and record the absentee ballot votes and the early voting ballot votes. In no event may the votes for any election be totaled until after all polls in the election are closed.

The absentee ballots were separated in alphabetical order within their designated precincts; the names on the ballots were checked and double checked to make sure that they were in their appropriate precinct.

The envelope containing the absentee ballot has a detachable slip with the voters name on it that is torn off before the votes are tallied. This is to prevent anyone from seeing how a voter cast his/her vote. Then the Board opened the envelopes with the absentee ballot votes and checked to make sure the voter filled in the appropriate dot for their precinct. If at any time an absentee ballot is questionable, the Absentee Board then chooses to accept or reject the vote. In the case of the city sales tax referendum, none of the 169 absentee votes cast were rejected.

At the same time the ab-

sentee votes are tallied, the early votes cast in the voting machines are tallied as well. The votes are removed by inserting a tally card into the machine and uploading the votes from the machine to the tally card.

The same process for set-



Election Vote Card and Tally Card

ting up the machines takes place again prior to Election Day. TCA § 2-7-134 states, After the tally sheets have been certified, the judges shall close and lock the voting machines and enclose the keys for each voting machine in a separate sealed envelope on which they shall certify



Administrator Fran Green Tallies Votes

the number of the machine, the polling place where it has been used, the number on the seal, and the numbers registered on the public and protective counters.

After the election ended at 8pm on March 10th, all of the voting machines, equipment, supplies and those important sealed transfer boxes with the voting and tally cards were brought back to the Election Commission office for the final tallying of the sales referendum vote.

Administrator, Fran Green opened each precinct's envelope containing the tally cards, inserted them into the electronic counter and the final tally was declared. In all, 2980 votes were cast. 2177 of those votes were Absentee and Early voting and 803 were Election Day votes. 1701 voted in favor of the sales tax and 1274 voted against it.

According to TCA § 2-8-101 The county Election

commission meets no later than the third Monday after the election to compare the returns on the tally sheets, to certify the results as shown by the returns in writing signed by at least the majority of them.

Knowing that we were observing the entire process of an election, including this meeting, proper notice wasn't given for this meeting. *The People News* inquired about the meeting the day after it was held to ask why we were not informed about it, to which Administrator Fran Green replied, "Sorry." She did however provide us with minutes from that

meeting from March 17th. According to the minutes, the Election Commissioners signed the certification page so the certified Election results could be forwarded to the City of Cleveland.

Also, Administrator Green informed the Election Commission that they will be holding another Sales Tax Increase Referendum this time for county residents only. With a motion made by commissioner White and seconded by Commissioner Kelley, a unanimous vote was made to hold the Bradley County Sales Tax Referendum on May 14, 2009 from 8am to 8pm with early voting beginning on April 24th and ending on May 9th from 9am to 6pm. Once again the early voting locations will be the Election Commission Office, Blythe-Bower Elementary School and Bradley Square Mall.

Recently, Sen. Dewayne Bunch, R-Cleveland, said Bradley County's new Republican member will be IT Committee Chairman, Milan Blake. Bunch believes Blake's computer knowledge will be an asset since voting in Bradley County is now an electronic process.

The new county panel will decide the future of Administrator Fran Green's post, but Sen. Bunch noted no complaints regarding her performance.

"They [Election Commission] have done a very good job through the years," he said. "I don't think there's ever been any question about issues on elections taking place in Bradley County."