



EDITORIAL FOR WILLIAMSON HERALD

AUGUST 16, 2023

WILLIAMSON COUNTY ELECTION COMMISSION CHANGES THE GAME AFTER THEY GOT THEIR MONEY FOR MACHINES

On June 12th, County Commissioners approved funding for new voting equipment — 200 ballot marking devices (BMDs), 70 scanners/tabulators, a high-speed tabulator, 145 new software/printers and other assorted software, equipment and licenses. Part of the deal was a promise by the Williamson County Election Commission (WCEC) to “obtain a feasibility study concerning the addition of hand-marked ballots” to our voting process.

Well, that agreement has just been thrown for a loop.

As the WCEC began discussions about the project at their July 27th meeting, they established a new prerequisite, one not shared with County Commissioners during their May 8th or June 12th votes. Election Commissioner Bob Brown asserted — and Chairman Jonathan Duda agreed — the scope of work for the project now MUST require the addition of a NEW machine—at least 25 “ballots-on-demand” printers.

At a cost of almost a half million dollars.

That money can't be found in the WCEC 2024 budget, and it's unlikely the County will approve another \$475,000 to pay for these machines on top of the county's billion-dollar-plus debt. And you can bet the WCEC won't do the secure thing to make hand-marked paper ballots (HMPBs) possible and return us to precinct voting (as demanded in the Tennessee Constitution) and away from vote center voting.

So, it's obvious this precondition of purchasing ballot-on-demand printers is meant to ultimately ensure HMPBs can't be added. I'm even betting the firm they select for the study will be supportive of BMDs and not HMPBs.

What do vote centers have to do with this?

With the implementation of vote centers in 2020, the WCEC has already squeezed more voters into fewer voting locations. Before 2020, we voted in 43 precincts. Now we vote in 25 vote centers.

The longer lines in polling places results from a combination of 42% less voting locations for 12% more citizens and 19% more registered voters since 2019. Plus, the use of [susceptible BMDs](#) that, as poll watchers have attested, don't reduce, but increase voter wait times.

Since voters aren't assigned to a specific vote center, there is no way the WCEC can plan for voter turnout at each center. So, if HMPBs are added and vote centers retained, all 25 centers will need to have enough paper ballots to address races from throughout the county. That could mean 100 or more different versions of hand-marked paper ballots in each center. WCEC wants ballot-on-demand machines to print ballots at each vote center.

Yes, now our new machines need more vulnerable machines.

Despite what the WCEC argues, vote centers have not increased voter turnout over precincts as [a Tennessee Secretary of State data chart proves](#). Since 2000, Williamson County voting patterns have generally remained in sync with other Tennessee counties that still use precincts. But the voter growth trend here is relatively flat.

If we can move back to safer, more secure precinct voting, we could easily add hand-marked paper ballots with each precinct likely having only one ballot and voter wait times reduced as more voters skip over BMDs and mark their paper ballots with a pen in numerous privacy booths. No need for ballot-on-demand printers. There's no law that says we can't vote in precincts once again. But that's not on the WCEC's agenda.

Their solution? More machines in vote centers that require BMDs and an internet connection.

So, regardless of what they told commissioners on June 12th, the WCEC just revealed how they plan to prevent HMPBs from entering Williamson County.

They will most likely not choose a true "independent" firm for this HMPB feasibility study because they want a study that will support BMDs (their preferred solution which they've TELEGRAPHED for the last two years) and not paper.

They will not move us back to precinct voting, which would make HMPBs easy and safer while easing the crowding and internet requirements of vote centers.

And they will recommend the purchase of more machines at a cost of \$475,000, knowing it won't fly with the County.

They will have staved off HMPBs. Despite what one Commissioner told Election Chairman Duda on June 12th: "You heard the people... they want hand-marked paper ballots... so give them hand-marked paper ballots!"

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