

Tennessee Secretary of State
Tre Hargett



Elections Division
312 Rosa L. Parks Avenue, 7th Floor
Nashville, Tennessee 37243-1102

Mark Goins
Coordinator of Elections

615-741-7956
Mark.Goins@tn.gov

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Honorable Richard Briggs
Chairman, Senate State and Local Government Committee
425 Rep. John Lewis Way North
Suite 774 Cordell Hull Bldg.
Nashville, TN 37243

Honorable John Crawford
Chairman, House Local Government Committee
425 Rep. John Lewis Way North
540 Cordell Hull Bldg.
Nashville, TN 37243

RE: Tenn. Code Ann. § 2-3-307 Report – Convenience Voting Centers

Chairman Briggs and Chairman Crawford,

Tennessee had 3 counties participate in a pilot project on convenience voting centers. The participating counties were as follows:

1. Monroe County
2. Williamson County
3. Wilson County

Pursuant to Tenn. Code Ann. § 2-3-307, please find enclosed a report on the implementation of convenience voting centers in these counties during the 2020 election cycle. If you have any questions regarding this report, please let me know.

Sincerely,

Mark Goins
Coordinator of Elections

Enclosure

Convenience Voting Centers

**State of Tennessee
Division of Elections**

January 29, 2021

Convenience Voting Centers

Tenn. Code Ann. § 2-3-301 created a pilot project to determine whether convenient voting centers could be successfully established for local and state elections. On Election Day voters are assigned to a single polling location within a geographic boundary where they live. Under the pilot program voters can vote at any polling location within their county. Normally, the number of polling locations are reduced under a convenient voting center plan, but voters have flexibility as to where they may vote.

In 2018, the Rutherford County Election Commission successfully conducted elections using convenient voting centers. The Rutherford County Election Commission proved that fair and impartial elections can be conducted using convenience voting centers in Tennessee. The Rutherford County Election Commission continued its use of convenient voting centers in 2020 and saw the same success as in 2018.

In 2019, the General Assembly authorized Monroe, Williamson, and Wilson Counties to conduct the 2020 elections under a pilot project using convenient voting centers.

The county election commissions in these three counties conducted the elections of 2020 using convenient voting centers.

Evaluation of Program

1. Flexibility of Voters Outside of their Election Day Precincts to Vote

Each county election commission reported that the use of the convenient voting centers gave voters more flexibility in where they voted on Election Day. Voters who worked away from their traditional Election Day polling places were able to select and vote at locations most convenient to their commute to and from work. Williamson County Election Commission reports that at nearly half of the vote centers, 30% of the voters casting ballots at the vote centers were geographically “outside” the area of their residence. Also, at three of their vote centers, more than 50% of the voters cast their ballots geographically “outside” the area of their residence.

In the aftermath of an EF-3 tornado, Wilson County conducted the March 3, 2020 Presidential Preference Primary using convenience voting centers. The Wilson County Election Commission reports that the convenient vote centers gave them the flexibility to adjust to the voter needs on that day. Because each voting center was already equipped with ballot-styles for every voting precinct, redirecting voters to the closest vote center to their physical location at the time, proved to be very beneficial to the voters.

Additionally, each county election commission reported the ease in changing a voter’s address. Both voters and election officials found the process for changing the voter’s address to be a more efficient process at the vote centers. Voters were able to change their address and vote at the vote center, rather than having to travel to a different polling location that served their new address. Voter centers allowed the voters to vote right where they were. For voters who would have otherwise had to travel to a different polling location to vote under their new address, this not

only saved time for the voter, but it also made it easier for election officials to gather and maintain the change of address forms.

The flexibility provided to these voters outside of their voting precinct on Election Day serves one of the primary purposes of the program, which is to allow registered voters in the county to vote where they are, regardless of their voting precinct.

2. Staffing

Both Williamson and Wilson Counties saw a decrease in the cost of poll officials. While Williamson County saved approximately \$15,000, Wilson County saved \$23,080 in the cost of poll officials. Election Day polling place for a voting precinct must be staffed with at least four poll officials. Consolidating the polling locations into vote centers allowed the election commissions to sufficiently staff the vote centers with their best poll officials.

Although Williamson and Wilson Counties experienced a savings in the cost of poll officials, this may not be the case for other counties using the vote center concept. For example, Monroe County did not see a cost savings in the initial implementation of convenient voting centers because they did not reduce polling locations. When considering whether to reduce staff, it is important to note that the number of voters being processed does not change.

3. Investing in the Vote Centers

There is an investment that must be made on the front end of establishing vote centers. Each of the counties invested in the implementation of the convenient vote centers. The county election commissions reported costs incurred to set up the technology needs of the vote centers and to mail notices to each active voter identifying the locations of the vote centers throughout the county.

To establish vote centers, the counties had to pay for additional labor in preparing each building being used as a vote center. To prevent voters from double voting on Election Day and have a reliable list of eligible voters at each voting center, IT work must be performed. Each vote center must be adapted to securely transmit voter information electronically. Specifically, each building to serve as a convenience voting center must be equipped with a secure Virtual Private Network (VPN).

All locations had to be equipped with secure routers to connect directly with the servers for the county election commissions. Hardwire network ports had to be added to any vote center that did not already have them. Finally, multiple laptops had to be set up for each of the vote center locations. Many of these costs are initial set up cost and will not recur unless a vote center is changed.

Monroe County Election Commission and Williamson County Election Commission used their county IT department to set up, equip and test the vote centers for conducting the elections. Both county election commissions also used talented students from their local state technical college or state community college. On the other hand, Wilson County contracted with independent IT consultants. Each of these county election commissions invested in internet routers, secure servers, and enhanced IT protocols for each vote center.

An additional expense in establishing convenience voting involves the initial cost of notifying voters of the new polling locations. Each county mailed a notice to each active voter informing them of polling place changes. The postage and printing for these required notices were costly but assisted in educating the voters of their new polling place options. The notice listed the name and address of each vote center used throughout the county.

Although a cost savings may be seen over a period time after future elections, any county election commission wanting to use convenient vote centers to save money may compromise the integrity of the process. Consequently, I recommend the focus of implementing convenient voting centers be for the convenience of the voter and not to reduce the cost of elections.

4. Vote Center Locations

When conducting convenient voting centers, most counties reduce the number of voting locations on Election Day and use accessible buildings which can support the increased volume in voters. Both Williamson County Election Commission and Wilson County Election Commission conducted their convenience voting center pilot project under this plan. While Williamson County Election Commission used 25 voting centers, Wilson County Election Commission used 18 voting centers. On the other hand, Monroe County Election Commission used each of their existing 13 polling places as vote centers.

In all three counties, the vote centers were in various areas of the county. Each of the county election commissions selected locations that were able to accommodate the flow of voters from throughout the county in the buildings used as vote centers.

Since not as many voting locations may be used, there is a potential for savings by paying less rent for buildings. Both Williamson County Election Commission and Wilson County Election Commission experienced a slight savings in the rental cost for buildings used as vote centers. Monroe County Election Commission, however, did not experience a cost saving in this area because they used their existing polling locations as their vote centers.

5. Turnout

Tennessee saw record turnout of voters in the November 3, 2020 election. Monroe County Election Commission, Williamson County Election Commission and Wilson County Election Commission each found the use of the convenience voting centers to be advantageous in accommodating the increased numbers of voters.

As mentioned earlier, Wilson County Election Commission cited vote centers as a benefit during the March 3, 2020 Presidential Preference Primary. Wilson County Election Commission reports that the vote centers provided effective alternative voting locations for displaced voters. During a chaotic day, the election commission accommodated voters in vote centers closest to where the voters found themselves. Because each vote center was prepared to process a voter from anywhere in the county, in very busy vote centers, the election commission rerouted voters to vote centers with less traffic. This allowed voters to be processed sooner and reduced lines for election officials.

6. Disadvantages to Convenient Voting Centers

With all the benefits to convenient voting centers, Williamson County Election Commission and Wilson County Election Commission identified two different disadvantages in convenient voting centers. Williamson County Election Commission noted that it was difficult to predict which vote centers would have higher turnout. Wilson County Election Commission noted that on election night, precinct-by-precinct Election Day results cannot be reported until all election night results have come into the office.

Both counties, report that these disadvantages can be overcome. Williamson County Election Commission anticipates that additional elections will provide a pattern that will help them identify favored voting locations. Wilson County Election Commission anticipates that educating voters, candidates, and the public of the modified reporting process of election night returns will lessen the expectation of precinct-by-precinct election night results.

Another disadvantage is some voters give significant push back when a polling location is closed or moved in their community. In rural areas some voters have a tradition of voting at their “home precinct”. Counties that have had high population growth in recent years are less likely to see resistance to closing polling locations.

Conclusion and Recommendation

Just as in Rutherford County in 2018, the pilot projects in 2020 demonstrate that convenient voting centers can be a viable and effective voting option for Tennessee voters. For counties that have successfully used early voting satellites and have access to strong IT personnel, implementing vote centers may be appropriate.

A county that has not conducted an election using early voting satellites is not ready to utilize convenient vote centers on Election Day. Early voting satellites are a vital precursor to convenient voting centers. Monroe County Election Commission, Williamson County Election Commission, and Wilson County Election Commission have previously used early voting satellites. The experience in identifying buildings suitable to handle an increased number of voters, the experience of handling the IT demands of remote voter registration records, and the experience of having voters from anywhere in the county converge upon a voting location, all helped these county election commissions make convenience voting centers a success.

Counties must have access to strong IT personnel and broadband internet capability to be good candidates for implementing convenient vote centers. Understanding the technological demands of vote centers is a fundamental cornerstone to successfully implement convenient vote centers.

Monroe County, Williamson County, and Wilson County successfully held elections in 2020 using convenient voting centers. Each of these county election commissions worked with IT staff to ensure that hardware requirements, software requirements, and cybersecurity interests were met to handle the demands of vote centers on Election Day.

I commend the election officials in Monroe, Williamson, and Wilson Counties. These election officials worked hard to ensure that their counties were thoroughly prepared for conducting

elections using convenient voting centers. They did so on the day of a tornado in March and amidst COVID-19 in August and November. Implementing a pilot project at any time creates its own challenges, but to do so under the conditions of a tornado or a pandemic makes the successes even more commendable. Contingent upon legislative approval, if the county election commissions for those three counties would like to establish convenient vote centers for future elections, I support them.