



Lessons in early voting

Several townships were part of an early voting pilot program for the November election—allowing state and local election officials and clerks to test, assess and review early voting technology and procedures before the 2024 presidential primary on Feb. 27, the first statewide election where nine days of early voting is required for all communities.

Following approval by Michigan voters of Proposal 2022-2, and codified by Public Act 81 of 2023, nine days of early voting must be offered before all statewide and federal elections (with an option for municipalities to offer early voting for local elections if they choose). Early voting can be offered by the municipality, jointly with other municipalities, or cooperatively with the county. The township must enter into a municipal or county agreement to offer early voting with other municipalities or the county.

Following the Nov. 7 election, MTA reached out to several townships that participated in the early voting pilot to learn about their experiences and advice they have for

all townships, as they embark on this new challenge. The following are responses from **Carie Milburn, Roscommon Township** (Roscommon Co.) clerk, and **Mary Gillis**, deputy clerk in **Scio Township** (Washtenaw Co.).

How is your township offering early voting (EV)?

Milburn: Our county was not interested in offering early in-person voting. Roscommon Township is offering early in-person voting as a single jurisdiction at least through 2024. After that, we are going to look into possible joint agreements with other townships.

Gillis: We have entered into a county-wide agreement wherein Scio Township will serve as the early voting site for our own voters as well as those of four other nearby communities for the 2024 elections. Our wonderful county elections director, **Ed Golembiewski**, and his staff already started to contact the election inspectors who worked with us on nine days of early voting this October–November. They were a big support to us when we had to “go it alone” for the local election of Nov. 7, 2023.

What was the early voting process like for you? How did you prepare?

Milburn: I was very nervous at first. After training, I realized that clerks are more prepared than we realize. Implementing early in-person voting ended up being much less stressful than Election Days.

I prepared by reviewing the bills and laws that have been implemented for Proposal 2022-2, working with the township board to decide what is best for our jurisdiction, talking with our election equipment provider (ES&S), securing our EV tabulator, laptop and security cage, recruiting election workers, Microsoft Teams training meetings with the state and state Bureau of Elections (BOE), practicing on the “test site” for the electronic pollbook (EPB) tool and Qualified Voter File (QVF), reviewing the EV paper pollbook, and lots of discussions with other clerks.

Gillis: Our township clerk, **Jessica Flintoft**, invited a number of experienced inspectors whom she suspected might have the time and interest to devote to more than one day of work per election. She also attempted to choose inspectors who would want to work EV in the elections of 2024. In preparation, she directed our temporary staff of clerk assistants to create supply boxes for each day of early voting.

I worked with the paper pollbook that was created for early voting and devised a step-by-step guide (a version of the one we always distribute to our polling place chairs) that would help our workers through the process of opening and suspending the polls, and securing ballots and machines overnight. Some of this was a work-in-progress, with the first day’s team in particular getting very little direction from us and taking it upon themselves to document the process of suspending the polls and securing materials/equipment. This became the basis for that section of the “Step-by-Step Chair’s Guide to Early Voting.”

Did you encounter any challenges?

Milburn: There were a few challenges similar to any election. One day, everyone was unable to access the EPB tool for less than a half-hour in the morning, but the BOE got it handled and everything ran smoothly.

Gillis: I would say one of the biggest challenges was not knowing specifically how the state required us to conduct early voting until we received the paper pollbook about

one week before early voting began. Another challenge was difficulty accessing the practice site created for the EV EPB—I think Jessica was finally able to access the practice site just a day or two before we began early voting, which didn’t inspire a lot of confidence in terms of teaching our inspectors how to use it. Then, the first few days of early voting, the live EPB site software was kind of glitchy, kicking off users after only 10 minutes of inactivity and sometimes, but not always, requiring an elaborate dance of multifactor authentication to log on again. Some of our inspectors were intimidated by having to create to specifications a 16-character password they could remember; others were alarmed by how stripped down the EPB interface was compared to the one in use on Election Day.

And we always face the challenge of finding election inspectors who identify as Republican—one for each of the nine days of early voting was a particular challenge.

“Clerks are resilient. With the support of their boards, they will be able to implement early in-person voting and do whatever they can to make the voters comfortable with the process and let them know that our elections are safe and secure.”

**—Clerk Carie Milburn,
Roscommon Township
(Roscommon Co.)**

As you look toward February, will you make any changes based on your November experience/takeaways?

Milburn: There will be updates to the EPB tool and guidelines that will be updated by the BOE and state, but as far as changes in-house, we are going to stick with how we ran early in-person voting in November.

Do you have any advice for township clerks as they are preparing for early voting for the presidential primary?

Milburn: You’re ready. You are going to be surprised, after training, how quickly you are able to learn the EPB tool and the steps to set up in QVF. The difficult part of being a single jurisdiction was the time you have to spend getting ready, being at the polling location, opening and closing, etc. Over two weeks, we—me and my deputy—put in over 50 additional hours each, with no days off. By the second Saturday, it was starting to weigh on us, but we just tried to keep a positive outlook. Laughter is always the best medicine.

Gillis: One thing we did that helped calm everyone's nerves about this new process was to ask our election inspectors to behave as though the new EPB was not functional—we used it, but we also had them handwrite every voter name in a paper pollbook, assign a voter number, and write that number on the application to vote. We didn't have a ton of voters (405 over nine days), so this wasn't much of a burden, and it was reassuring to know that if the electronic system failed in any way, we would still have documentation of all voting activity.

Do you have any additional overall thoughts on early voting and your township's experience?

Milburn: During the early in-person voting process, the clerks, BOE and state had an email chain that was open. We could ask questions of the other clerks and offer strategies and processes that we were using. It was nice to know that there was someone else going through the same issues or to be able to offer help to clerks with questions or offer support. I am planning to do an email chain for the township clerks in our county during early in-person voting.

Also, clerks are resilient. With the support of their boards, they will be able to implement early in-person voting and do

whatever they can to make the voters comfortable with the process and let them know that our elections are safe and secure.

Gillis: In retrospect, it seems to me that this experience underlined the need for workers who are flexible within the limits of the law. We weren't always sure we were filling out these new forms correctly, but everyone knew the basic laws governing voting in this state, so we could be sure we were getting the most important part of the day's events done correctly. Those who prefer to have every task spelled out ahead of time in full were fairly uncomfortable with learning this new thing called early voting on the fly, but those who trusted in their grasp of the laws governing voting could take a more flexible approach to the presence or absence of directions regarding, e.g., completing one of the certification documents attached to one of the containers headed for the security closet.

Looking for more elections resources? MTA has invited the state Bureau of Elections to both our 2024 Capital Conference on Jan. 23 (turn to the inside back cover) and our Annual Conference (see the registration brochure in this issue) to share updates and insights on elections administration. Visit our Online Learning Library (<https://learn.michigantownships.org>) for webinars on election topics, including our October *Now You Know* one-hour "Elections Update" webinar with MTA staff. We are also developing a new elections resource toolkit; watch for availability on www.michigantownships.org and in our *Township Insights* weekly newsletter.



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