



Insights into administering early voting

One of the biggest changes brought about by Proposal 2022-2, approved by voters in November 2022 to enshrine expanded voting rights in the state Constitution, was nine days of in-person early voting before statewide and federal elections.

This is required for every jurisdiction for these elections, starting with the 2024 presidential primary (whose final date has not yet been set). While townships have *the option* of providing early voting for other elections, it is only required for statewide and federal elections. As implementation legislation has now been signed into law enacting Proposal 2 changes into statute, continued questions and concerns may linger for clerks and elections administrators on how to accomplish this new requirement.

What are early voting options and what considerations should townships weigh as we move closer to our first election with this new voter access?

What's in the new law

As shared in the July issue of *Township Focus*, under Public Act 81 of 2023, townships can run early voting on their own, or enter into an agreement to work with other municipalities or the county to offer this new requirement. The township must submit a voting plan to the county on how early voting will be conducted. Under the new law, the state must create sample voting plans and agreements (watch MTA publications for

updates on when these become available). The municipal and county agreements will include information such as number of precincts of participating municipalities, how voters will be notified of early voting sites, budgeting and cost-sharing procedures, supervision, staffing, and more.

PA 81 also outlines deadlines for when county clerks must notify municipal clerks in their county if the county clerk intends to conduct early voting, when a township can withdraw from a municipal or county agreement, and notification requirements to voters of early voting sites.

A look at other states

In other states across the country, elections and early voting are administered at the county level. There is generally no attempt to provide early voting sites by municipality. Rather, early voting offers more options for voting in person—such as the nine days in Michigan—with a trade-off of traveling further than on Election Day to vote, but with the convenience of selecting the day the voter wishes to vote. Generally, early voting accounts for upwards of one-third of the total vote, reducing mail voting and taking pressure off Election Day.

In Ohio, for example, there is one early voting site per county regardless of the size of a county. Miami-Dade County, Fla. has nearly 1.5 million registered voters, who are served by 28 early voting sites. In Tennessee, which has conducted early voting since the 1990s, Knox County—with 300,000 registered voters—has 10 early voting sites. Tennessee’s Montgomery County, which is similar to Michigan’s Berrien, Jackson and Monroe Counties, has 118,000 registered voters and two early voting sites.

While Illinois has townships, they don’t administer elections. Perry County in southern Illinois, with a population of nearly 21,000, has two early voting sites, one beginning in late September and the other beginning in mid-October. These two early voting sites serve all the townships in Perry County.

Early voting sites are frequently located where voters typically travel for shopping, work or school. While there appears to be concern that Michigan early voting requires voters to leave their township to early vote, this is typically the case in states where early voting is used. Voters in more rural areas often drive considerable distances for work, shopping and school. Early voting is no different, as it is spread across nine pre-election days covering two full weekends. Of course, each voter’s Election Day precinct will remain open and available on Election Day, and absentee voting also remains an option.

Working together for successful elections

While some assert that Michigan’s decentralized electoral system is its strength, there is also the assertion that intergovernmental collaboration makes our elections process work as well as it does. Both county and municipal clerks are necessary for successful elections in Michigan. Bringing together this expertise is essential to Michigan voters having an excellent early voting experience.

Some county clerks who have not conducted elections at the municipal level may be reluctant to offer a countywide agreement to the municipalities in their respective counties. However, if these agreements are offered with municipal clerk involvement, the county clerk can play a coordinating role while each municipal clerk steps up to supervise an early voting site on one of the early voting days, rather than supervising an early voting site for nine days. This relationship can work in either county agreements or municipal agreements.

Regardless of the early voting approach—stand-alone, municipal agreement or county agreement—county clerks will be intimately involved in early voting. In most counties, they will do most of the training of election inspectors who will conduct early voting. They will have to closely work with municipal clerks to accurately program the early voting tabulators, which will be more complicated because multiple precincts will often be programmed on a single tabulator. They will program the vote accumulation software to accurately report the unofficial and official results from each early vote tabulator. Finally, they will conduct the canvass and, when required, the recounts of early voting results. Both will require troubleshooting when issues arise.



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There are counties where collaboration discussions have been occurring to create county agreements that could effectively serve the voters without exorbitant fiscal outlays. These counties include Ottawa, Oakland, Hillsdale, St. Joseph, Saginaw and Washtenaw.

Many municipal clerks serve on a part-time basis, making nine days of early voting administration a hardship, particularly if the clerk has another job. At a minimum, municipal clerks who do not enter a countywide agreement should seriously consider entering a municipal agreement with other municipal clerks in the county. This can be an agreement with a handful of municipal clerks or with all the municipal clerks in a county.

There is, of course, a cost to implement and administer early voting, and there are substantially higher costs to municipalities that decide to go it alone instead of joining an agreement. The Fiscal Year 2023-24 budget did include up to \$30 million for incentive grants to counties to coordinate implementation of early voting and incentivize multi-jurisdictional coordination. By joining a county or municipal agreement, a substantial amount of the early voting expenses will be paid by the incentive grants. And while the Legislature may appropriate funding for tabulators and election inspectors for 2024, it is very questionable whether this appropriation will be made in future elections. To date, the Legislature has never appropriated funds for municipalities to defray statewide elections in August and November.

Additional guidance to come

Additional guidance and training from the state Bureau of Elections will continue to be released over the next few months. As township boards, clerks and election administrators discuss and make decisions on how best to implement the changes required by Proposal 2, MTA will share updates and information as they become available to help ensure that townships can continue to provide efficient, effective elections for their voters.

Chris Thomas, fellow at the Bipartisan Policy Center, and former Michigan director of elections (1981-2017)

With contributions by MTA staff

BOE launches early voting webpage

Just prior to *Township Focus* press time, a new “Early in-person voting” webpage was launched by the Michigan Department of State, Bureau of Elections (BOE), sharing answers to many frequently asked questions regarding early voting and early voting sites. The page, designed to inform clerks, partners, stakeholders and the public, will be updated on an ongoing basis to answer additional questions. You can access the page on www.michigan.gov/elections; click on “How to vote in Michigan,” then “Early in-person voting.”



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