

Democracy in ACTION

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USING TECHNOLOGY IN ELECTIONS

Department Profile:
Election Systems & Technology

The Douglas County Election Commission has been challenged with needs that have never been seen by election officials before. There are new computer systems, new pieces of technology, and the problems that accompany them.



In order to respond to these new challenges, the Election Commission has created two new positions that deal exclusively with

technology. John Anderson, the Election Systems and Technology Coordinator, began his service with the Election Commission as an intern before taking on his new role. Richard Wolf, Election Specialist, also began as an intern before becoming a full-time employee.

Between them, they bring a wealth of experience and knowledge related to all aspects of computer technology. John is currently pursuing his Masters of Public Administration with an emphasis in Computer Science, while Richard graduated from Creighton University with a Bachelor's Degree in Computer Science.

Together, they assist the Election Commission staff when there are problems with the Voter Registration System, maintain the

{ CONTINUED ON PAGE 4 }

CELEBRATING WOMEN'S SUFFRAGE

The sky was clear and the sun was shining on Wednesday morning, August 23rd as Election Commissioner Dave Phipps, Chief Deputy Election Commissioner Lisa Wise, and Public Relations Coordinator Justine Kessler prepared for the 19th Amendment Celebration in front of the City/County Building.

The Douglas County Election Commission, in association with the League of Women Voters of Greater Omaha, had met a month prior in an effort to find new ways to celebrate the passage of women's suffrage. The 86th



anniversary of the 19th Amendment was August 26, 2006, so the Election Commission and the League of Women Voters decided to hold several events on August 23rd to celebrate when women received the right to vote.

A crowd of about twenty people and several members of the media attended the 9:00 a.m. press conference where guest speakers included a League of Women Voters member, Evelyn Zysman, Omaha Mayor Mike Fahey, Nebraska First Lady Sally Ganem, and Election Commissioner Dave Phipps. Zysman recalled her first voting experience in 1932 and stressed the importance of teaching children to be active in voting when they are old enough. Mayor Fahey spoke of the importance of women in



politics and encouraged people to get involved in the process. First Lady Ganem urged women to vote, become candidates, and to lead others. Election Commissioner Dave Phipps wrapped up the ceremony by providing voting statistics and registered voter numbers for men versus women in Douglas County. For instance, in the 2004 General Election there were 113,000 women voters and 93,000 men voters.

Following the speeches, which urged citizens to get involved in voting, the League of Women Voters and the Election Commission held a two hour registration drive in the City/County Building. Later in the afternoon, a Susan B. Anthony reenactment took place at the National Park Service, Midwest Regional Headquarters.



Susan B. Anthony was an instrumental part to the passage of women's suffrage. In May 1869, Anthony helped form the National Woman Suffrage Association.

The celebration ended with a showing of the film, "Iron Jawed Angels" at Westside High School. The two hour movie portrayed the struggle women went through in order to gain the right to vote and the excitement they felt when they did.



In This Issue...

2

Elections In the News.
Commissioner's Corner.

4

Department Profile Continued:
Election Systems & Technology.

3

Election Calendar.
Question & Answer.

ELECTIONS IN THE NEWS

Frank Brown, Omaha City Council District 2 Recall

On August 18, 2006 a Recall Affidavit was completed seeking to remove Frank Brown from Omaha City Council District 2. Nebraska Revised Statutes outline the process for recalling an elected official.

A Recall Affidavit must be completed by a registered voter within the elected official's district. This registered voter is considered the principal circulator. The Recall Affidavit states the official to be removed from office and the reason for removal.

After the Recall Affidavit is completed, the Election Commission then notifies the elected official that he/she is being sought to be removed from office. The elected official

then has 20 days from the date of receiving the notice to send a defense statement to the Election Commission. Once the elected official's defense statement is received or after the 20 days have passed, the Election Commission prepares the recall petition pages, which include the reason for the recall from the principal circulator and the elected official's defense statement, if any.

The Election Commission then issues the petition pages to the principal circulator and the principal circulator has 30 days from the issue date to gather 35% of the total votes cast for that office in the last general election. There are a few exceptions for other offices. All signatures must be from registered voters within the elected official's district. In the Frank Brown recall, nearly 2,100

signatures need to be gathered before October 9, 2006. The Election Commission will have 15 days from the date the petitions are returned to determine whether a sufficient number of signatures were obtained.

If there are enough signatures, the Election Commission will notify the elected official and the affected political subdivision, in this case the City of Omaha. After receiving notice, the elected official will have five days to resign. If the official does not resign within five days, the political subdivision shall order an election to be held not less than thirty nor more than forty-five days after the expiration of the five day period.

If the voters choose by a majority vote to remove the elected official, the official is removed from office unless a recount is ordered. Once the official is removed, a vacancy will exist and a replacement will be chosen by the governing body.



In the Frank Brown recall, nearly 2,100 signatures need to be gathered before October 9, 2006.

Commissioner's Corner...

A Message from Election Commissioner Dave Phipps



Dave Phipps
Election Commissioner

It's coming. The election is just around the corner. Frankly, it's a welcome diversion from petitions. That's been the big story in elections this year, at least from our perspective. Now we're back in business doing what we love – getting ready for voting.

Over the last three years, our office, as well as all election offices, have gone through tremendous changes. Some have been required by new election laws, but other changes have occurred because they were long overdue.

My basic philosophy has been to push forward. Revamp. Revise. The idea of "That's

the way we've always done it" has carried no stock with me. If it doesn't make sense, we change it. If we can do it better, faster, and cheaper, then we're going to do it. No matter how many late nights and hectic weekends it takes to get it done.

My first year as Election Commissioner has been no exception to this rule. We have implemented a new statewide voter registration system, received new equipment for the polls, and changed just about every process we have. And that was just for the Primary!

But now we're getting ready for the General Election. The processes are in place. The equipment is in, tested, and ready to go. The computer systems are working just like we need them to. We could now simply go through the motions

and coast through this election without one sleepless night. I wouldn't worry one minute. It'd be that easy, but we're not going to do it.

There's no way we're going to be complacent when we can do it better, faster, and cheaper. We're going to do things we've never tried before. In fact, we're going to be doing things that only a handful of jurisdictions in the country have done – we're going to program our own ballots and machines, and we're going to print everything in-house.

In years past, we always had to wait for our ballots and programming. We have decided it's time to take matters into our own hands. In the process, we'll save hundreds of thousands of dollars. In the grand scheme of things (Douglas County's budget is nearly \$300 million) it may not seem like much, but it's a start. And if we see other areas where we can save, you can bet that we'll work very hard to make it happen.



ELECTION CALENDAR

October 2006

2nd – First day to vote early in person or request ballots by agent at the Election Commission.

20th - Deadline for mailed voter registrations to be postmarked.

20th - Last day to register at DMV, agencies, libraries, or with Deputy Registrars.

27th - Deadline for write-in candidate to file notarized affidavit and filing fee.

27th - Deadline for in-person voter registration at the Election Commission, 6:00 p.m.

November 2006

1st - Deadline for early voting ballots to be requested and mailed to a specific address, 4:00 p.m.

6th - Deadline for in-person early voting at the Election Commission Office.

7th - Election Day. All early voting ballots must be returned to the Election Commission by 8:00 p.m.



More 19th Amendment Celebration Pictures



Question & Answer

Q. What are the rules and laws regarding campaign signs?

A. Rules for campaign signs are governed by each individual city and municipality within Douglas County, therefore, you must find information from each city in which you wish to place campaign signs. We do provide information on our website, however, the Election Commission does not regulate campaign signs and has no jurisdiction over them.

Q. How can I get a list of registered voters in Douglas County?

A. The Douglas County Election Commission runs a list of registered voters at the beginning of every month. This list is available on CD ROM for \$75.00. The CD contains the voter list in three formats; Microsoft Access 2003, Microsoft Access 1997, and a tab delimited text file. The voter list is available for noncommercial purposes only and can be ordered by calling the Election Commission at (402) 444-VOTE (8683). Once ordered, the voter list can be picked up in two days where and an oath will need to be signed. Cash or check is accepted.

Q. Is electioneering permitted?

A. The display of candidate buttons or badges, handing out sample ballots or other campaign literature, or verbally urging support for, or opposition to, an issue or candidate on the ballot is only allowed beyond 200 feet from the entrance of the polling place.

Q. What is an exit poll?

A. Media organizations conducting any type of an interview on Election Day with a voter, who is leaving the polls after having voted, seeking to determine voter preference. No person shall conduct an exit poll, a public opinion poll, or any other interview with voters on Election Day seeking to determine voter preference within twenty feet of the entrance of any polling place or, if inside the polling place or building, within one hundred feet of any voting booth. Any person violating this section shall be guilty of a Class V misdemeanor (§32-1525).

Q. I am a candidate; may I come and observe the counting of ballots on Election Night?

A. State law says that only accredited observers appointed by each political party Central Committee may observe the ballot counting process, unless permission is given by the Election Commissioner. Depending on the number of observers requesting access, the Douglas County Election Commission will permit campaigns to send a representative to observe, however, they must call the Election Commission prior to Election Day.



John Anderson

Election Systems & Technology
Coordinator

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Election Commission’s website and intranet, prepare and design the ballots, program the election equipment, and utilize Geographical Information System (GIS) software to produce maps for the office, campaigns, and candidates.

“We have a big job,” Anderson says. “There isn’t a single area of the office that doesn’t utilize technology in some way. If there’s a problem, we’re who they call.”

Wolf added that, “When you have the deadlines this office has, you know how important it is to keep the machines running. It’s a lot of responsibility, but it’s definitely exciting. There is very little boredom in this job.”

Right now, both are at their busiest time of the year. While continuing to ensure all the office’s PCs are operational, they must prepare and print the ballots for Election Day, as well as program the machines used in the office and at the polls.



Richard Wolf

Election Specialist

the large costs associated with the process, and because of John’s and Richard’s expertise, the Commission decided that it would be a good time to start bringing those outside services inside, and at the same time, save a substantial amount of the taxpayer’s money.

“By doing our own programming, we figured we’ll save anywhere from \$100,000 to \$150,000 per election year,” said Election Commissioner Dave Phipps. “When it comes to the taxpayers, we’re always trying to improve and reduce the amount of money we spend. This will help tremendously.”

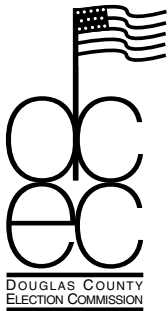
Another new process the Election Commission is taking on is to actually print the ballots for the polls in the office. With the purchase of a new printer, the office has the potential to

save tens of thousands of dollars each election.

“We’ve determined that by printing our own ballots,” said Phipps, “we will save Douglas County taxpayers an additional \$70,000 for this general election alone. While our initial startup costs are high, we will pay for it by the next election. I don’t think there’s any other way to look at it – we’re going to save money.”

All this is possible because of the Election Commission’s shift of focus. In the past, the office has simply relied on outside help for technical services. Now the office is looking to use a highly trained staff to manage these issues, while utilizing temporary staff to work on more mundane issues, like entering data and assembling supplies for the polls.

“We’re looking to use more brains than brawn,” said Anderson. “It only makes sense to use technology in ways that will save money and improve efficiency. Too many places buy technology for technology’s sake. Here, we’re trying to find new and innovative ways to make use of available technology to improve the overall operation.”



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