

# Democracy in ACTION

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## A LOOK BEHIND THE SCENES

Department Profile:  
Administration Department

When people think of the Election Commission, they probably think of registering voters, going to the polls, or voting early. All those areas of the Election Commission are vital to bringing democracy to the voters of Douglas County, however, just like any other office, there are people behind the scenes that make the office work.

The Administration Department of the Election Commission is comprised of some very fine and hard working individuals whose contributions to the Election Commission may not always be seen from the outside, but are vital to making the office run smoothly.

The person in charge of this area, also manages the day-to-day operations of the entire office. Mike Scarpello, the Elections Manager, is in his seventh year with the Election Commission. He was a former Chief Deputy Election Commissioner who decided to put his considerable skill and talent into managing the office full-time.

Assisting in everything from filing to ensuring the security system works (and everything in between) is Erin Mayer, Administrative Coordinator, who has worked in the office since the Fall of 2004. Her job is one of the most varied and diverse ones in the office, and she handles everything with grace and aplomb.

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## ONE FOR THE RECORD BOOKS

November has come and gone. The election is over and the Election Commission is getting to work on all those things that get pushed aside during election season. So how did the election go? In one word: Amazing!

"This is the smoothest election I've ever been a part of," said Dave Phipps, Douglas County Election Commissioner. "I've never experienced one that had so few problems and ended so successfully. I couldn't be happier."

Nearly 50 percent of registered voters in Douglas County took part in this November's election. That's an increase of nearly nine percent from four years ago. In real numbers, it meant that over 150,000 citizens in Douglas County either went to the polls or voted early.

There were big winners and losers, and some races that were just too close to call on Election Night. The results took a while (the final release for the night happened at nearly 5:00 a.m. on Wednesday morning), but the day was without major incident or event, and voter feedback was incredibly positive.

In order to achieve that successful result, some significant changes were made this election year. For the first time, the Election Commission, created its own ballots from scratch, programmed the machines to read them, and printed them without the assistance of an outside vendor. This far from simple act will save the county's taxpayers over \$1 million over the next five years.

Second, it was another year of record-breaking early voting. Each and every year, over the last several years, the number of people voting before Election Day has been increasing. In the 2004 Presidential General Election, approximately 30,000 people requested an early voting ballot. In the 2006 Gubernatorial General Election, over 33,000 people requested an early voting ballot, either by mail or by voting in person. As a percentage of the vote, in 2004, 15% of voters voted early. In 2006, 22% voted early, which is a significant increase.

While the election was a great success, some people complained that Election Night returns were reported too slowly. However, there were some uncontrollable changes in policy that created this situation and the Election Commission is working on a solution to ensure results are reported in a more timely manner. Results need to happen faster, but the most important issue for the office has always been, and will continue to be, that the results

are accurate. In that respect, Election Night returns fulfilled that requirement with flying colors. Even after a recount in a closely contested Legislative race, the margin of victory after a recount changed by only one vote.

"It was a great election, and I'm immensely proud of each and every one who worked for us on Election Day," said Phipps. "From my staff down to the over 2,000 election workers in the field and in our office, I couldn't be more proud. They performed magnificently, and I look forward to doing it all again in 2008!"

This far from simple act will save the county's taxpayers over \$1 million over the next five years.

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## ELECTIONS IN THE NEWS

### No Elections in 2007

Every four years it happens: Douglas County does not have any scheduled elections for an entire year. Because of state law and the Omaha Municipal Code, there are no political subdivision races up for election in 2007.

Statewide elections are held every even year, with the Presidential race in one year and the Governor's race in the other. The 2008 presidential elections will be held May 13, 2008 and November 4, 2008. The next gubernatorial elections will be held May 11, 2010 and November 2, 2010. The City of Omaha elections for mayor and city council are held every other odd year, and the next City of Omaha elections are scheduled for April 7, 2009 and May 12, 2009.



### Early Voting in the 2006 General Election

With each passing election, early voting (absentee voting) has become more and more popular with the voters of Douglas County. In the 2006 General Election, 22% of the votes cast were from early voters, compared to approximately 15% in the 2004 General Election. In a period of two years, the number of early voters increased by an estimated rate of 5.5%. Between the 2002 General and the 2004 General elections, the number of early voters increased by almost 5%. Based on this significant increase over the past four years, it is apparent that the Early Voting Department at the Douglas County Election Commission is going to be an eventful place during the 2008 Presidential General Election.

While we cannot be sure of the reason early voting has become such an increasing trend, we can make an educated guess that early voters prefer

the ease of receiving their ballot in the mail or voting in person at our office because they then have the option of choosing when voting fits into their schedule. The reason behind the early voting increase really does not matter to the Election Commission; our job is to serve the voters of Douglas County as efficiently and effectively as possible. So, if the number of early voters continues to increase in 2008, we'll be ready.



### QUOTE OF THE DAY

"Well done is better than well said."

- Benjamin Franklin

## Commissioner's Corner...

A Message from Election Commissioner Dave Phipps



Dave Phipps  
Election Commissioner

You may (or may not) have noticed that we missed a newsletter. Sorry about that, but we were a little busy with the election, recount, etc. We'll do better in the future.

It was a tremendous relief to be done with the election in November. Elections are always a busy time, obviously, but we had additional pressures to worry about during this election, and we wanted to make sure we got it right. Fortunately, everything worked out.

In fact, it was the smoothest election I've ever been involved with. Having gone through six

major elections now, I think I can tell the difference between an election that went well and one that had a few bumps in the road. This election was as smooth as glass, and I couldn't be more pleased.

There will always be mistakes made on Election Day. Whenever you have over 2,000 people working in the field and in our office, there are bound to be some problems. However, during this election hardly any problems occurred. It seems that our hard work is really paying off.

I certainly can't take credit for these successes (as much as I try). I have an incredible staff who works tirelessly day-in and day-out in order to produce a successful election.

This election was as smooth as glass, and I couldn't be more pleased.

Without their hard work and dedication, democracy in Douglas County would not be in the state that it is today – working well.

Some of you may wonder how successful the elections were, especially when you had to wait well into the early morning hours to hear the final election results. While I understand completely how hard it is to wait that long (remember, many of us worked a 24-hour day that day), I believe ultimately that people want to know for certain that the election was run correctly, and the ballots were counted properly and accurately.

A number of issues prevented early returns like you were used to. We're working on those issues. But in the end, all the ballots were counted properly, all the races came out the way the voters wanted, and democracy continues on.



## COUNT 'EM AGAIN

Nebraska Law says that if a race is within a certain percentage after the final votes are counted, they must be recounted.

Election officials always do their best to make sure that every vote was counted correctly and that no vote was missed. But, like everyone else, election officials are human and sometimes make mistakes. However, when most people make a mistake, they don't get to read about it in the paper the next day. They don't get phone calls from friends and family who say they saw you on TV the night before explaining your error. It's a tough business sometimes, but election officials also always strive to do better the next time.

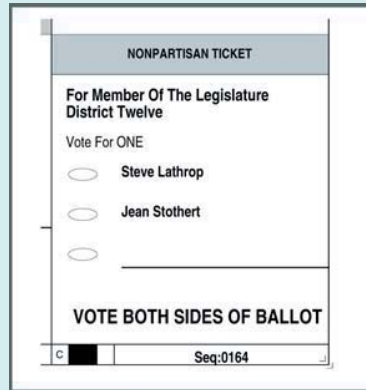
who did not re-register when they moved, to vote on Election Day. Before the vote is counted, the Election Commission ensures that the person was entitled to vote his or her ballot. It's a safe-guard for the voters, and it's a system that Nebraska has had, in one form or another, for a good number of years.

Whenever a race is that close, there are usually people who may want to question the system in order to find more votes, however, in this case, both candidates were very professional in their questions and did not make wild accusations (which you do see in a number of other areas of the country) regarding the election process. People from both campaigns examined the election data,

and both sides asked questions, but in the end, no one contested the election results.

For an election official, this is a happy ending. People were able to examine the facts and found the processes and procedures of the office to be sound. It is exactly what you want – validation for the voters to know that everything is above board and correct. It makes everyone feel better, especially those who do this work day-in and day-out.

Provisional ballots, in short, allow voters



September 27, 2006 - Meeting with Candidates and Campaigns



October 2, 2006  
AutoMARK Demonstration  
at League of Women Voters  
Press Conference



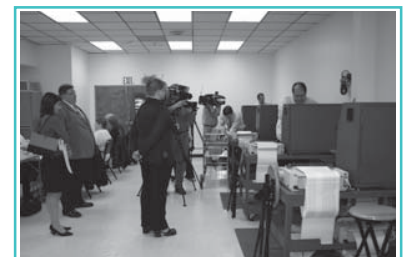
October 2, 2006 - League of Women Voters  
Press Conference



October 30, 2006 - Early Voting in Election  
Commission Lobby



November 3, 2006 - Staff Loading Precinct  
Supplies in Boxes



November 6, 2006 - Public Test Deck  
Demonstration



Mike Scarpello  
Elections Manager

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She is in many ways the linchpin that keeps the place from falling apart.

Finally, the Accounting Coordinator, Jim Severin, who has worked in the Commission

for six years, provides some incredibly valuable services that often get overlooked, like purchasing, bookkeeping, and accounting.

Administrators are often unsung heroes. They go about their jobs, not wanting glory or recognition, but simply wanting to get the job done. They know their value and their role, and they work day-in and day-out making sure the needs of everyone who gets noticed by the public are fulfilled.

Mike Scarpello, a graduate of the University of Nebraska College of Law, began in the Election Commission as its Chief Deputy in 2000. He worked with three Election Commissioners in that capacity before a vacancy in the Elections Manager position led him to take on the challenge of managing the office.



Erin Mayer  
Administrative Coordinator

“This is a profession I care deeply about,” said Scarpello. “Because the right to vote is so important, we get a real sense of satisfaction when we’ve helped people to exercise that right.”

Scarpello, who is known for putting in tremendously long hours at the office, said the pressure of the job is very high because running an election is much more complex than most people realize.

“In our office, we have to use our technical expertise to run complex systems, our organizational skills to coordinate thousands of workers, and our people skills to deal with the public,” Scarpello said. “We’re also guided by complex election laws that provide a definite time-frame where deadlines can’t be pushed back and by budget constraints that limit our resources.”

Erin Mayer is a graduate of the University of Nebraska at Lincoln, who had moved with her family to Seattle, Washington for several years. But in time, they felt the call of Ne-

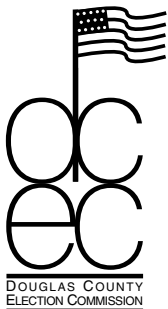


Jim Severin  
Accounting Coordinator

braska beckoning them home, so in 2004 they made the move back to Omaha. Mayer joined the Election Commission a few months before the 2004 General Election and learned first-hand just how busy a presidential election can be.

Jim Severin is a graduate of the University of Nebraska at Omaha. After serving his country in the Navy for many years, he decided to work in the accounting industry, where he worked for several banks before he came to county government, where he started in the County Clerk’s Office. Eventually, he made his way over to the Election Commission where he keeps track of the budget, purchases all the supplies needed by the office, and is responsible for billing for elections.

Dave Phipps, Douglas County Election Commissioner, knows just how important their job is. “These are people who do a function that the public doesn’t get to see, but I know without a doubt that without them, the public would very quickly notice their absence.”



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