



Travis County Commissioners Court Agenda Request

Meeting Date: April 17, 2012

Prepared By/Phone Number: Michael Winn / 854-4728; 632-5927

Elected/Appointed Official/Dept. Head: Dana DeBeauvoir, County Clerk

Commissioners Court Sponsor: Judge Biscoe

AGENDA LANGUAGE:

Receive public comment on the option to use vote centers in future elections beginning with the November 6, 2012 Presidential Election.

BACKGROUND/SUMMARY OF REQUEST AND ATTACHMENTS:

Letter to Commissioner Court with program overview for November 2012

STAFF RECOMMENDATIONS:

ISSUES AND OPPORTUNITIES:

FISCAL IMPACT AND SOURCE OF FUNDING:

No fiscal impact anticipated.

REQUIRED AUTHORIZATIONS:

Susan Bell, Chief Deputy Clerk, 854-9587

Gail Fisher, Elections Division Manager, 854-9193 / 632-5916

Michael Winn, Elections Program Manager, 854-4728 / 632-5927

Related Departments:

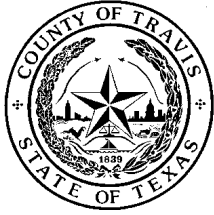
Daniel Bradford, County Attorney's Office, 854-3718

Tina Morton, Travis County Tax Assessor-Collector, 854-9473

Dolores Lopez, Director, Voter Registration Division, 854-9203

Joe Harlow, ITS, 854-9372

AGENDA REQUEST DEADLINE: All agenda requests and supporting materials must be submitted as a pdf to Cheryl Aker in the County Judge's office, Cheryl.Aker@co.travis.tx.us by **Tuesdays at 5:00 p.m.** for the next week's meeting.



Dana DeBeauvoir
 Travis County Clerk

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Recording, Elections, Computer Resources,
 Accounting, and Administration Divisions
 5501 Airport Boulevard, Austin, TX 78751-1410

Misdemeanor, Recording, Civil/Probate,
 and Records Management Divisions
 1000 Guadalupe, Austin, TX 78701-2328

March 20, 2012

TO: Travis County Commissioners Court
 FROM: Dana DeBeauvoir
 RE: Request for Public Hearing and Vote on Use of Vote Centers
 (also known as Countywide Precinct Elections)

We are requesting that the Commissioners Court set a public hearing date of April 17, 2012 to receive public comment on the option to use vote centers in future elections beginning with the November 6, 2012 Presidential Election. We are also requesting that the Court put forth an agenda item to approve the use of vote centers for the November 6, 2012 election. Vote centers allow election day voters to cast a ballot at any polling location instead of being restricted to only voting at their neighborhood polling place. Travis County implemented a pilot vote center program last year for the November 8, 2011 Constitutional Amendment Election.

For vote centers to be used following a pilot election, the Texas Election Code states that the Commissioners Court must approve the county's continued use of this practice, and that the Texas Secretary of State must then determine whether the county's past participation in the pilot program was "successful." Part of determining whether or not a program was successful is for the county to hold a public hearing.

Travis County's Pilot Program was Popular with Voters

For the pilot, Travis County adopted a unique approach to its vote center program by having all of its regular election day precinct polling places operate as vote centers. Some of the popular early voting locations were also used on election day. This direction was supported by community activists and proved to be an effective way to introduce this program. Evidence of this program's popularity includes:

- **There was heavy use of the program in Travis County.** Of the 29,707 voters who voted on election day, approximately 32% (9,516) of election day voters voted outside of their precinct.
- **Use of vote centers was high across the entire county.** Two interesting situations help demonstrate this point. First, Commissioner Precinct 1 had the highest percentage of persons living within a single commissioner precinct who voted somewhere other than their regular neighborhood precinct on election day. Second, among all voters who cast ballots outside their regular neighborhood precincts, Commissioner Precinct 3 had the highest percentage.

Of the voters who turned out on election day and were registered in	Comm Pct 1	approximately	37%	voted outside their neighborhood precinct.
	Comm Pct 2		31%	
	Comm Pct 3		28%	
	Comm Pct 4		30%	

Of all election day voters who voted outside their neighborhood precinct,	approximately	17%	were registered to vote in	Comm Pct 1
		28%		Comm Pct 2
		37%		Comm Pct 3
		17%		Comm Pct 4

- **Voters reported that they liked vote centers.** Feedback from voters was obtained via phone, email, Facebook, election workers, activists, representatives from local jurisdictions participating in the election, and members of the County Clerk's Election Task Force. During the election, no complaints about vote centers were received by our office or by the Texas Secretary of State.
- **Study suggests Travis County's vote center program increased turnout.** Robert Stein with Rice University and Greg Vonnahme with the University of Missouri-Kansas City examined Travis County's implementation of vote centers using statistical analysis, exit polling, phone calling, and mailers. Their findings state: "Travis County is one of the largest counties to adopt Election Day vote centers and the analyses show that the reform increased turnout in the county. We also find that individuals that were initially the least predisposed to vote were the most likely to utilize the vote centers." Their results suggest that the use of open polling locations increased turnout by 1.41% in Travis County.

Vote Centers will be Especially Beneficial for this November's Presidential Election

The November 6, 2012 Presidential Election is fast approaching, and we could see another record-breaking event. Using the vote center program for this type of large election will provide two important advantages:

- **Vote Centers will better serve voters.** One of the most important challenges on election day is getting voters to the polling location in the precinct where they are registered to vote. "Where do I go vote?" is by far the most common question heard every election. This is especially true in Presidential elections where there are many first time voters and voters who only participate in elections every two to four years - all of whom are less likely to be familiar with the location of their polling place. Add on top of that the confusion associated with newly redistricted boundary lines.

A good deal of time and resources will be devoted to resolving this issue, but even though information will be available online, thousands of calls will be responded to, and the power of the media employed; people will still go to the wrong location. When that happens, voters will be frustrated, they may not have time to go to their correct location, or they may give up and not vote. Still others will complete provisional ballots that will have to ultimately be rejected if they are not registered to vote in the precinct where they appeared. Vote centers will resolve this issue because any registered voter will be able to vote in any polling location in Travis County.

- **Without vote centers, additional funds will be needed to set up polling locations in 29 new precincts created by redistricting.** Using vote centers, the recommendation to Court will be that we not make any adjustments to polling locations because of the new lines. Voters will notice no change and will not be affected adversely because they can go to any location in the county. If we do not go this route, 29 new polling locations will need to be added. The cost of adding equipment, staff, and facility costs for these new precincts will be over \$500,000 and will need to be added to the FY13 budget.

We look forward to providing you with any additional information you may have and appreciate your attention to this request.

Thank you.

**Vote centers are not permitted in primary election, and were not an option for the City of Austin election because of limitations created by the crowded election calendar.)*