

Holding Municipal Elections During the Pandemic: Planning, Timing, and Considerations

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2

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Holding Municipal Elections During the Pandemic: Planning, Timing, and Considerations

- ▶ We are awaiting specific guidance from the Elections Division for conducting elections during the pandemic
- ▶ In the meantime, there are some initial considerations for planning for an election during COVID-19, which are broken down into five phases:
 - 1) Before Election
 - 2) Setting Up
 - 3) During Election
 - 4) Close of Polls
 - 5) After Election



Before Election

▶ Postponing Your Election

- ▶ Chapter 45 of the Acts of 2020 allows Towns with elections between March 23 and May 30 to postpone election to **June 30, 2020**
- ▶ Pending legislation would allow Towns with elections between March 23 and June 30 to further postpone elections to **August 1, 2020**

▶ Caucus

- ▶ Chapter 45 of the Acts of 2020 allows Towns to postpone caucus to **June 30, 2020**
- ▶ Pending legislation would allow Towns with caucuses before **July 31, 2020** to cancel caucus altogether this year, and use nomination papers instead



Before Election

▶ Posting Requirements

- ▶ If you postponed your election or caucus, at least **20 days** before the election or caucus, you must post on the official municipal website a copy of the following documents:
 - ▶ 1) Chapter 45 of the Acts of 2020;
 - ▶ 2) Vote of the Select Board/Town Council to postpone the election;
 - ▶ 3) Sample ballot

▶ Voter Registration

- ▶ If you postponed your election, the last date to register to vote is **10 days** before election
- ▶ Registrars must hold registration session on 10th day, from 2-4 pm and 7-8 pm



Before Election

6

- ▶ **Reduced Polling Hours**
 - ▶ Select Board/Town Council can vote to reduce the polling hours for a municipal election if the hours are not set by charter or bylaw
 - ▶ Polls must be opened by at least 12 pm, and must remain open for at least 4 hours
 - ▶ Cannot close polls early once they are posted in warrant, so action to reduce the polling hours must be voted upon and posted in advance

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Before Election

▶ Encourage Absentee & Early Voting by Mail

- ▶ For all elections continued under Chapter 45 of the Acts of 2020: all residents are eligible to vote early by mail, and those who are physically unable to appear at the polls due to being out of town, disabled, or prevented by religious reasons, as well as fear of COVID-19, may vote by absentee ballot
- ▶ Consider: posting information and application form on website and social media platforms, sending out press release to media, “reverse 9-11” call, e-mail listserv, etc.
- ▶ Many towns have also done public service announcements

▶ Encourage applications to be filed by mail

- ▶ Any form of writing (email, letter, form), not just a state application, will suffice so long as there is picture of signature
- ▶ Deadline to apply: 12 pm on last business day before election
- ▶ Nothing prohibits town from mailing application to all voters



Before Election

8

▶ Application Processing - Early & Absentee Voting

- ▶ Staff will be needed at town hall to receive applications, certify signatures, and mail out ballots
- ▶ Safety protocols should be considered and established, social distancing, appropriate PPE, treatment of paper applications and handling of ballots, inside envelopes and instructions.
- ▶ Early voting by mail allowed in connection with delayed elections under Chapter 45
- ▶ Ballots printed for original election date may be used; goal is to minimize expenses; for early voting applications, cross out the word “Absentee” on the ballot and insert the notation for early voting, i.e., EV. Also write the letters EV on the outside envelope.

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Before Election

- ▶ **Holding Election Requires Significant Coordination Between Departments**
 - ▶ Police, DPW, Schools, Fire, Town Manager/Administrator, Clerk's Office all on same page
 - ▶ Interdepartmental meeting to discuss preparations, locations, protocols, etc., and the role of each in establishing a successful plan
 - ▶ Reduce plan to writing, and have a version available to provide to public
- ▶ **Safety Planning**
 - ▶ Considerations: Professional cleaning service before and after election, transport of voting machines and ballots, lanes for voter check-in, plexiglass shields at table, tape to mark 6-foot social distancing, provide pens for all voters and/or suggest that voters bring their own pen (must advertise), PPE for pollworkers, including gloves, masks and shields, sanitizing plan for chairs, tables, etc.

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Setting Up

10

▶ Distribute Safety Plan Ahead of Time

- ▶ Notify poll workers ahead of time of steps taken to keep them safe; likely personal calls needed
- ▶ Notify voters of steps taken to keep them safe so they are encouraged to come out and vote (post on website, issue press release, “reverse 9-11” calls, etc.)
- ▶ Notify voters of expectations on election day (bring your own pen, wear mask and gloves, etc.)
- ▶ Encourage additional use of personal safety precautions on election day

Note: The Secretary has advised that you may not turn away a voter for failing to wear PPE. Consider providing extra masks and gloves for voters who may have forgotten them or were unaware of the requirements. If a voter refuses to wear PPE, de-escalation is likely the best approach, and consider best way to allow them to check-in and vote without endangering others



Setting Up

11

▶ Outside Signage and Considerations

- ▶ Lines: use tape to mark 6-foot distancing (may need extra police officer to monitor lines)
- ▶ Signage: outlining process, including PPE requirements; encouraging anyone with symptoms to self-identify
- ▶ Order/Flow: greeter to confirm that voters have read signage and to monitor flow (letting in 5 people in at a time, “take a number” system, etc.)

Note: Use separate entrance and exit if possible to reduce density



Setting Up

12

▶ Inside Signage and Considerations

- ▶ Check-in: placement of tables to allow 6-foot distancing for workers; consider splitting voting lists, or posting of signage or shield to allow separation between workers and voters, table “twinning” also an option
- ▶ Booths: placement to allow 6-foot distancing of voters, cleaned often in between voters
- ▶ Observers: perhaps consider assigning them a place to observe (taped off, chair, etc.), but must be close enough to hear discussion at, and see, check-in table
- ▶ Ballot machine: placement away from check-out table
- ▶ Secrecy sleeves: wipe down with disinfectant

Note: All ballots and machines must be inside

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Setting Up

▶ Inside Signage and Considerations

- ▶ Check-out: voter places ballot in machine; if spoiled, voter must be given new ballot (up to 3 all together), bin available for used secrecy sleeves, if reusing any equipment, wipe down with sanitizer before reuse; consider placement of bin for used masks, gloves, and trash; ensure sufficient signage for exit
- ▶ Consider whether arrangements need to be made for staff to use separate trash for used PPE, and whether it will be necessary to empty trash bins on election day; if trash will be collected throughout the day, include in safety plan process for removal of used PPE.



During Election

- ▶ **All staff must wear PPE**
 - ▶ Have police, greeter, and poll workers set example of social distancing and safety; consider providing all workers with face shields
- ▶ **Shift Work and Sanitization**
 - ▶ Consider whether you would like fewer poll workers on hand with more frequent shift changes so as to minimize prolonged exposure, or more volunteers on hand to attend to frequent cleaning and sanitization of booths, pens, etc.; adjust safety plan accordingly
- ▶ **Bathroom Access**
 - ▶ Safe access for all workers throughout day; they could also be authorized to return home for bathroom access; paper towels and barrel near door for disposal
 - ▶ Ensure that safety plan includes sanitization of handles and faucets after each use



During Election/Close of Polls

- ▶ **Provide Separate Consultation Area for Discussions with the Warden**
 - ▶ Consultation with warden at polling place typically happens in a “quiet area” away from the check-in table
 - ▶ Will need to be cognizant of social distancing during consultations
 - ▶ Consultation area should be established providing for 6-foot social distancing, and/or plexiglass or other type of shield
 - ▶ Police Chief and town manager/administrator, or their designees, also should be available to clerk during and after election hours to work through any safety-related issues



Close of Polls

▶ Ballot Counting

- ▶ At end of night, ballots are removed from machine and each ballot reviewed by team for write-ins; all hand count ballots, i.e., those that do not go through the machine, must also be hand counted
- ▶ Consider arranging ahead of time for willing staff, and or using so-called “closers” for this task
- ▶ Provide new masks, gloves, and hand sanitizer for this phase
- ▶ Set up counting area to provide for appropriate social distancing, even if that means “rearranging” furniture at this point

▶ Ballot Transport

- ▶ Ballots must be sealed in ballot box and returned to Clerk’s office
- ▶ Voting lists must be enclosed in envelopes
- ▶ Certain signage may be disposed of



Close of Polls

▶ Clean-Up Protocol For Polling Stations

- ▶ Chairs, tables, booths, etc. should be sanitized before being packed
- ▶ Consider having janitor or cleaning service come in to disinfect bathrooms and polling locations at close of polls
- ▶ Staff should wear PPE when cleaning up



Close of Polls/Post-Election

▶ Back at Town Hall

- ▶ After election, voting list must be scanned - to minimize interaction with list, PPE should be worn while list is copied; copy can then be used to scan

▶ Recount

- ▶ Petition for recount must be filed by 5:00 p.m. within 10 days of election
- ▶ Following a town election, no particular date by which recount has to be held
- ▶ If a recount is required, new safety plan will need to be developed and “typical” set up will likely need revision for safety purposes



Questions?

19

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