

Elections Audit
Follow Up Report

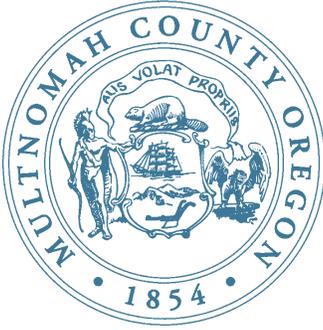
August 2008



LaVonne Griffin-Valade
Multnomah County Auditor

Sarah Landis
Principal Auditor

We conducted this performance audit in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards. Those standards require that we plan and perform the audit to obtain sufficient, appropriate evidence to provide a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives. We believe that the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives.



LaVonne Griffin-Valade Multnomah County Auditor

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MEMORANDUM

Date: August 29, 2008

To: Ted Wheeler, Multnomah County Chair
Maria Rojo de Steffey, Commissioner, District 1
Jeff Cogen, Commissioner, District 2
Lisa Naito, Commissioner, District 3
Lonnie Roberts, Commissioner, District 4

From: LaVonne Griffin-Valade, County Auditor
Sarah Landis, Principal Auditor

Subject: Elections Audit Follow Up Report

Attached please find the report on our formal follow up of the June 2007 *Elections Audit*. The primary purpose of the audit follow up was to review the progress on implementation of recommendations made in the original audit. Recommendations were focused in seven general areas, with 17 specific recommendations for strengthening processes. Of those 17 recommendations, we found that 11 are implemented, five are partially implemented or in process, and one is no longer applicable. Elections took steps to implement a number of recommendations even before the original audit report was issued and has put forth considerable effort over the past 14 months to complete this work and address other areas of improvement noted during the audit.

As discussed in the follow up results section of the attached report, Elections also made additional positive changes to election processes. These changes augmented the improvements made through implementation of audit recommendations and helped ensure Elections' success in managing the May 2008 primary election. Additional areas of minor concern were noted and have been discussed with management.

We appreciate the cooperation and assistance we received from Elections staff, particularly given their involvement in the busy primary election.



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Elections Audit Follow Up Report

August 2008

Background

The Multnomah County Auditor's Office released the *Elections Audit* in June 2007. The objective of the audit was to determine, through observation and testing, whether the Multnomah County Elections Office (Elections) had the proper controls in place to ensure an accurate, fair, and efficient election. Our overarching conclusion was that Elections administers its work effectively and that the public should have confidence in its ability to conduct elections fairly and accurately.

Elections must balance three primary and sometimes conflicting purposes: ensuring that elections are secure and accurate, providing convenience and high quality services to voters, and controlling costs. The audit made recommendations for some shifts in this balance, while also recognizing those areas where Elections is strong. The recommendations also focused on ways to document the practices that were already in place and ensure that the experience and knowledge of staff can be passed on.

Follow Up Results

Accomplishments in the Primary Election

During the primary election in May 2008, we observed that Elections had made significant improvements to its work processes, resulting in an election that ran smoothly. Specifically, Elections implemented audit recommendations and made additional improvements in the following areas:

- **Traffic:** better coordination and planning with Roads crews and others, additional ballot boxes around the Elections Building, and hand-collection of ballots from cars during high traffic periods helped ensure that congestion was minimized.
- **Workspace Reconfiguration:** front office operations were rearranged to move the phones and the ballot assembly work upstairs, diminishing the noise and activity levels downstairs. This created a less chaotic environment and allowed for better concentration and more organization, decreasing the likelihood of errors. The ballot chute that was installed between the second and first floors to convey the assembled ballots requested by voters contributed to faster service and a calmer environment.
- **Customer Service:** installation of terminals at the front counter allowed permanent and highly experienced temporary staff to work with voters on the spot, without having to take information back to desks to check on voter registration status and do other research. Having this ability means that voters are likely to get accurate and complete information. This arrangement, together with moving the ballot assembly process upstairs, significantly cut down on the amount of time voters had to wait to get service and receive their replacement ballots.

- Staffing Patterns: Implementation of shift work and cross-training helped to ensure full coverage during high demand times while keeping staff alert. Elections also reported that shift work helped keep things running smoothly.
- Ballot Pick Up: additional ballot boxes were taken to each library to ensure that existing boxes did not fill up with ballots before they could be picked up by runners. Additionally, a second car was added to the East County route to provide more frequent pick up of ballots.
- Leadership: Elections leadership has been in significant flux over the last six months, with the former director and assistant director leaving the county. The transition to the new Elections Director, Tim Scott, was smoothed by bringing in a previous, well-respected director to provide experience and knowledge during the election. Although these changes presented some difficulties, the conduct of the primary election is an indication that Elections will be able to continue carrying out accurate, fair, and efficient elections.

Implementation of Audit Recommendations

Elections began implementing the recommendations from the *Elections Audit* even prior to its release, and continued to make progress throughout the year. We appreciated Elections serious consideration of both the formal recommendations and suggestions for improvement.

As determined by our follow up work, the status of each recommendation is listed below.

Recommendation I: To standardize practice, clarify expectations, reduce the risk of error, and document critical elections processes, Elections should develop a policies and procedures manual covering all of its major internal operations. Status = in process

Conducting an election is a complicated process that is, as one Elections supervisor stated, fraught with “trip wires:” an error or oversight in any given part of the elections system could cause problems elsewhere. Procedures to control for such errors are important to guide workers, improve services to voters, and help avoid costly mistakes. During the original audit, we found that Elections lacked comprehensive, uniform, and easily accessible policies and procedures manuals.

In response, Elections developed procedures and manuals for many of its work processes. However, management noted that these are not as comprehensive or as user-friendly as they need to be to guide day-to-day operations. They indicated their intent to continue to work on these and have as many in place as possible prior to the November general election. We concur with their assessment and encourage them to continue with the strong efforts already underway.

Recommendation II: To better match existing staffing resources to needs, Elections should:

- A. Cross-train workers on multiple functions so that they can step into tasks where demand is heavy and cover breaks.*** Status = implemented
- B. Implement shift work during election periods to prevent fatigue, reduce error, and keep essential work processes moving*** Status = implemented
- C. Create skill redundancy for critical functions.*** Status = in process

Elections relies very heavily on the skills, commitment, and experience of both its permanent and temporary staffs to accomplish an enormous amount of work within a constricted timeline. Our original audit recommendations around staffing were intended to maximize the use of staff resources; ensure that employees did not become over-exhausted and thus have their judgment impaired; and provide coverage for all critical work areas so that the absence of one key employee did not bring the flow of work to a halt.

During the follow up observations, we noted that cross-training had increased and staff were better utilized in covering breaks and shifting work areas as demands dictated.

We also saw that shift work had been implemented across the entire office, a change that some staff members thought contributed to their ability to keep all tally machines and signature verification stations fully staffed and operating. Working at full or optimal capacity allowed Elections to keep up with ballot processing and counting and avoided log jams that could have delayed results.

Elections anticipates a high voter turnout for the November general election this year, and says that the ballots will be two pages long, essentially doubling the amount of work that has to be done to process a ballot once its envelope has been opened. We encourage Elections to continue its use of shift work as much as possible and to ensure there is substantial flexibility in its scheduling so that it can adequately cover its projected increase in workload.

Our final staffing recommendation was to create skill redundancy among staff members to reduce Elections' dependence on individuals and ensure all crucial work was accomplished. In many areas, this coverage has been thoroughly implemented, with training, observation, and on-the-job experience to ensure at least two-person deep knowledge of elections processes. However, staffing changes earlier this year left a significant array of duties that had to be picked up by other staff, often without regard to their existing workload or adequate information to complete the new tasks. As a result, there remain gaps in assigning primary and back up staff across critical elections functions.

Recommendation III. To increase security, Elections should:

A. Document the movement of ballots during the preparation of unmailed ballots (between the printer and the post office). Status = implemented

Elections implemented this recommendation by maintaining documentation of a physical audit trail that shows when and between whom custody of ballots changed hands. This practice is a means to control and document the movement of ballots when they are delivered from the ballot printer to the mail house, as they are picked up by the post office, and as unused ballots are returned to Elections from the mail house.

B. Document any ballot return envelopes pulled from the Blue or Green Room after signatures have been verified. Status = implemented

Elections did develop and implement a system to log ballots in and out of the Blue and Green rooms.

Recommendation IV: Because of the sensitive nature of elections management, the need for transparency, and protection against error and fraud, Elections should:

- A. Create a distinct barrier between tally machine programming and design and marking of the test deck.*** Status = implemented

The intent of this recommendation was to limit the perceived potential for tampering with the programming of the tally machines, although we found no reason to believe such problems would occur. We feel confident in the response Elections has provided us that adequate safeguards are in place to ensure that tally machine testing procedures are reliable and protections are in place around the tally equipment, including the computer used to program the machines.

- B. Ensure that at least two board members of different parties agree on voter intent for all enhancements and duplication of ballots.*** Status = in process

During the original audit, we observed that some members of the opening boards were making enhancements (such as correcting incomplete erasures, smudges, X marks in ovals, circled candidate names, etc) without consulting other board staff. This practice creates a risk for error and undermines the intent of the state requirement for multiple party inspections and agreement on all enhancements. In response to this recommendation, Elections wrote and distributed a new policy for the boards that required them to confer with others at their table prior to making enhancements. During our observations of the primary election, we saw that this new directive was only partially implemented and that additional training and oversight are necessary to ensure that the new practice becomes standard operating procedure.

- C. Discontinue allowing tally machine operators to make any enhancements to ballots. Ballots that need enhancement should be directed to the duplicating board.***
Status = implemented

During the original audit, we observed a number of instances where tally machine operators enhanced ballots that the machines could not read. We recommended that this practice be stopped to ensure that someone of a different political party than the person making the enhancement verified the change. Elections agreed with this recommendation and instructed staff to send all ballots needing enhancement to the duplicating boards. During the follow up observations, we noted that the new policy had been implemented and that operators were no longer making enhancements on ballots.

- D. Add oversight and quality control to the work of the opening and inspection boards and the log in and signature verification staff.*** Status = partially implemented

In the original audit, we found that the work of the opening boards and signature verification staff lacked adequate quality control mechanisms and recommended increasing supervision of these staff to ensure that their work was being done correctly and that they complied with procedures. Elections added supervisory capacity to both of these functions for the primary election, but additional quality control measures need to be implemented to ensure new procedures are being followed among the opening boards (see Recommendation IV.B. above).

We suggest table-by-table monitoring at the beginning of their work, talking through the new procedure, and systematic monitoring of each table throughout the course of the election.

Recommendation V: With recent improvements to the building, security has improved. However, to further increase security, Elections should:

- A. Prioritize plans to remodel the Red, Orange, Green, and Blue Rooms due to the sensitivity of voted ballots.*** Status = implemented, construction in process

Implementation of all recommendations has been planned for and construction work began immediately following the primary election, which should increase security for the November general election.

- B. Move office supplies to another location outside of the Red Room (where vote tally equipment is stored and used) until funding for the door replacement to the supply room becomes available.*** Status = implemented

Elections responded to this recommendation immediately and moved commonly used office supplies to the mail area outside the Purple Room. We did not observe staff going through the Red Room during the election to replenish office supplies. Construction now underway will create a separate entrance to the supply room.

Recommendation VI: Planning for VAT activities should include:

- A. Adjusting the size of staff to the need for service.*** Status = implemented

Voter Assistance Team (VAT) services have been scaled back and reconfigured since the November 2006 election. The scope of work no longer includes outreach, and temporary staff assigned to the VAT are kept occupied with other duties when they are not needed for VAT related work. VAT activities are coordinated by a permanent staff person and are provided by two teams of two people. Additional staff resources are available if workload demands increase.

Demand for VAT services could increase for the November 2008 general election as overall voter turnout is anticipated to be high. Additionally, the experience of the May election was that requests for assistance were clustered rather than spread out over the course of the election, complicating the task of scheduling. We encourage Elections to continue to plan for the eventuality of fluctuating and potentially heavy workload by ensuring that there are enough trained staff members available that can readily be pulled from other duties to cover VAT-related services. Elections should also try to maintain some space that can be used flexibly to accommodate the possibility of greater numbers of voters with special needs.

- B. Avoid drawing resources away from other critical areas of elections work by seeking funding and policy direction via a formal program offer or dedicated portion of the base budget request.*** Status = no longer applicable

Elections pursued dedicated funding for the VAT from grants, but was not successful in this effort. More recently, the program was significantly downsized, rendering this recommendation moot.

Recommendation VII: To improve traffic movement, Elections should:

- A. In writing, specify the expectations for traffic movement with the agency providing these services and frequently monitor traffic to ensure it is flowing as quickly as possible.*** Status = implemented

The control and management of traffic around the Elections building was markedly improved when we observed the May 2008 primary. Elections was thorough in its planning and worked effectively with Roads staff to ensure traffic flowed as smoothly as possible.

- B. Further explore alternatives for improving traffic movement, such as the addition of a ballot box on Belmont, having Elections staff take ballots from cars without having them turn on to 11th (if they can do so safely), and redirecting non-voting traffic.***

Status = implemented

Elections implemented a number of traffic movement improvements:

- Collection of ballots from vehicles by elections workers on 12th Avenue during periods of heavy traffic
- Addition of a Belmont drop box
- Addition of an extra collection box each on 11th and on Belmont and spreading them apart so two cars could drop off simultaneously.
- Redirection of traffic off Morrison eastbound.
- Use of Roads crew to direct traffic to next available box and to prevent people from coming eastbound up 11th

- C. Clearly communicate and post expectations for 8:00 p.m. cut-off with Roads crews, runners, traffic management staff, Elections staff, and observers to increase consistency and transparency and reduce the risk of problems.*** Status = in process

Coordination of the 8:00 p.m. cut-off had been the responsibility of a position that was eliminated earlier this year. As we noted in Recommendation II.C. above, distribution of duties after the staffing reduction was not thorough and, as a result, the responsibility for coordinating cut-off fell on a different staff person who already had a full workload. We did not observe any problems with vote cut-off procedures outside the Elections Office, but also noted that the training was hastily done only 20 minutes before the cut-off. We believe that Elections should provide instructions and training for all those handling vote cut-off and should post the cut-off procedures to ensure transparency.

Suggestions for Improvement and Additional Concerns

In the *Elections Audit Technical Report*, we noted areas that needed improvement for Elections to consider. These were suggestions to address concerns that did not rise to the level of formal audit recommendations. We found that Elections had addressed the majority of these suggestions in such

areas as ballot preparation, tally machine testing, voter assistance, beeping and signature verification, front counter service, and observers.

Suggestions that were not addressed by Elections are included either in the section above with recommendations or in list below, which contains additional areas of concern that arose during the follow up.

Generator

Elections again declined to rent a generator for the May 2008 election to provide back up electricity in the event of a power disruption. At present, there is some indication that the space available for stationing a rented generator would interfere with the ballot drop boxes on Belmont. We continue to believe that emergency power sources are advisable for the November general election and encourage Elections to continue its work to find alternative places to put a generator. If Elections chooses to accept the risk of a power outage, it should work to put adequate back up plans in place to ensure that the election can move forward with minimal disruption and no loss of data.

Phone bank

This year, telephone service for voters was changed and expanded. The operation was moved upstairs, the staff size increased, and responsibility for answering the phones was given to temporary staff so that permanent staff could assist voters at the front counter. While staff agreed that moving the phones upstairs was beneficial in reducing the noise level and that the overall experience was quite positive, there were a number of problems that arose with the set up, reportedly including misinformation being given over the phone, inadequate communication between the front office and the phone bank, not enough training, and not enough supervision. Elections is aware of these concerns and has been working on solutions for the November general election.

Ballot assembly

Moving the ballot assembly work upstairs and installing computer terminals at the front counter made the work of filling ballot requests more efficient and improved service to voters by reducing their wait time to generally just a few minutes. A few additional improvements would further strengthen this change:

- Once a voter leaves the terminal at the front counter and goes to wait for a ballot to be produced and delivered, there is no one responsible for ensuring that he or she receives that ballot in a timely fashion. Elections should take steps to address this problem during the busiest times by asking the ballot runners or line tenders to be aware of how long voters have been waiting so that they can have someone check on the status of their requests and/or posting a sign that tells voters to alert a staff person if they have been waiting for a long time.
- Although there is a phone in the ballot assembly area that front counter staff can call, there were some problems with this arrangement. Elections has indicated that cell phones and other options will be available for the November election.
- Runners who picked up ballots from the chute and delivered them to voters were effective, but this function was not always fully staffed, even during busy times at the front counter. The number of voters waiting for ballots grew when there was only one runner and wait time increased. Elections should ensure that there are two runners during peak activity at the front counter.
- Finally, we believe that Elections should improve the locking system for the ballots that are stored in the conference room upstairs as the locks are flimsy on the sliding storage panels currently in use.

Follow Up Scope and Methodology

We initiated a follow up to the *Elections Audit* in March 2008 to observe the May primary election. Our first objective was to check the implementation status of audit recommendations and suggestions for improvement. Additionally, we wanted to determine whether there were any additional risks or concerns that could affect the November 2008 general election, which is forecast to have a full ballot and high voter turn out. Other concerns that fell outside the scope of the follow up objectives were covered in a separate memorandum to management.

We observed many of the same processes and events during the May 2008 election as we did during the original audit. In addition, we conducted pre-election interviews with management and interviews of all Elections staff after the primary was complete. We also reviewed policies and procedures, plans, and other relevant documents.

This audit follow up was conducted in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards. Those standards require that we plan and perform the audit to obtain sufficient, appropriate evidence to provide a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives. We believe that the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives.

Response to Follow Up Report



MULTNOMAH COUNTY OREGON

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M E M O R A N D U M

TO: Lavonne Griffin-Valade, County Auditor
Sarah Landis, Principal Auditor

FROM: M. Cecilia Johnson, Director of Department of Community Services

DATE: August 28, 2008

SUBJECT: Elections Audit Follow Up Report

The Department of Community Services is very pleased to have received your follow up report to the Elections Audit of June 2007. We are particularly grateful for the time, effort and conscientious review performed by the Auditors staff initially and in the follow up review.

It goes without question, that we are most proud of your “overarching conclusion that Elections administers its work effectively and that the public should have confidence in its ability to conduct elections fairly and accurately”.

The observations of the Auditor’s staff concerning the planning and preparation, implementation of recommendations from the original Audit report and specific improvements we implemented in assuring better traffic coordination; workplace reconfiguration leading to a more effective environment and the likelihood of less errors; the customer service improvements and reduction of wait time as a result of the computers being placed at the counter; the implementation of shift work schedules and cross training; increased ballot pick ups; and most important the planned leadership support for our very competent new Elections Director, Tim Scott, via the engagement of former Elections Director, Vicki Paulk are all appreciated for their acknowledgement of the purposeful and dedicated effort of staff and leadership in owning and leading opportunities to continuously improve.

We are especially pleased that you have noted the majority of your recommendations from the original audit as “implemented, partially implemented or in process” as we wholeheartedly accepted the Auditor’s recommendations as wise counsel particularly as we sought and continue to seek balance amongst the “three primary and sometimes conflicting purposes” you so eloquently refer to in your follow up report: “ensuring that elections are secure and accurate, providing convenience and high quality services to voters, and controlling costs”.

As we are actively engaged in preparing for the Presidential Election we continue to be vigilant regarding the implementation of recommendations made in the original Audit, addressing the suggestions for improvement raised in this follow up report and preparations to assure capacity for the exceptionally large voter turnout that is anticipated. Again, Lavonne, to you and your staff we are grateful for your effort and assistance.



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Audit Report: *Elections Audit Follow Up*
Report #08-07, August 2008
Sarah Landis, Principal Auditor

The mission of the Multnomah County Auditor's Office is to ensure that county government is honest, efficient, effective, equitable, and fully accountable to its citizens.

The Multnomah County Auditor's Office launched the **Good Government Hotline** in October 2007 to provide a mechanism for the public and county employees to report concerns about fraud, abuse of position, and waste of resources.

The **Good Government Hotline** is available **24 hours a day, seven days a week**. Go to GoodGovHotline.com or call 1-888-289-6839.



The Multnomah County Auditor's Office received the **2007 Bronze Knighton Award** from the Association of Local Government Auditors for the *Elections Audit* issued in June 2007.