

Testimony to the New York City Council Committee on Governmental Operations Oversight: Evaluating the Board of Elections' Preparedness for the 2012 General Election and Various Proposals for Improving Elections in New York City.

Monday, October 15, 2012

Good afternoon. My name is Kate Doran. I serve on the Board of the League of Women Voters of the City of New York. As a multi-issue, non-partisan political organization we encourage informed and active citizen participation in government, work to increase understanding of major policy issues, and influence public policy through advocacy and education.

Since 1919, voter education, voter service, and election administration have been priorities for the League of Women Voters in New York. Accordingly we appreciate this opportunity to comment today.

We applaud the Board of Elections, in particular the Executive Staff, for its initiative in making changes in the process of reporting unofficial election night results. We thank the New York City Police Department for its forbearance and cooperation, and, we hope that this "real life" experience will inform and facilitate the rewrite of closing procedures in New York State Election Law.

We believe that the voters and poll workers are well served by the peace keeping function performed by officers on duty in poll sites. The public also appreciates that Police Officers take custody of, and transport, memory sticks and marked ballots. We hope however, when new law is written the NYPD will be relieved of reporting requirements.

Election Law is New York State Law. Often, we in New York City feel frustrated at the slow pace of change. We are very pleased to see the City Council take up these bills which address local election-related issues. The League of Women Voters supports the bills under examination here today. All of them will create more transparency, greater accountability, and bring more people into the electoral process. The League was an early and strong supporter of Intro 728 which requires voter registration forms be provided to parents enrolling children in school. Parents and children are prime stakeholders in this city and every effort should be made to provide the opportunity for them to participate in the political process.

As many of us predicted, a significant number of voters either did not hold on to the Board's August mailing to Voters, or, had no memory of receiving it. A very

sophisticated voter told me on September 13th, “I got that mailer, but I said to myself, ‘I know how to vote,’ so I threw it away.” (This voter was at the wrong poll site on 9/13.) Our informal survey at the League of Women Voters led us to conclude that the Board of Elections produced a glossy advertising piece, rather than an official document that people felt compelled to read. We heard complaints that it looked like “Junk Mail,” or a catalogue. The Board is to be congratulated for deciding to send a second “Notice to Voters” that, we understand, will more clearly and directly alert Voters to poll site changes.

Given that this is a Presidential election, voter turnout in November will be much higher than it was in September. To further complicate matters, voters, a majority of whom may not have voted in September, will be dealing with new ED numbers, and possibly new AD numbers, and new poll sites. The Board needs to prepare for confused and ununiformed voters.

Here is one suggestion: Print “Poll Site Specific” Street Finders. A poll site specific Street Finder, which will be considerably smaller than the County Street Finder, could be used by an Information Clerk who greets voters who may be standing on line to enter a poll site. The Information Clerk could welcome voters, thank them for coming out to vote, and check their address against the “Poll Site Specific Street Finder.” If the voter’s address is not included in the Poll Site Specific Street Finder, that voter could be sent inside to another Information Clerk, or a Coordinator, who would research the voter’s address in the County wide book and direct them to their correct poll site. The Information Clerk who “works the line,” could also provide ED numbers to the voters who are at the correct site.

Once the voter is in his or her correct poll site the next challenge is the wait on line to sign in at the ED table. Here is another suggestion. Print two Poll Books. Choose A to L, and M to Z, or some other division that makes sense depending on the voters in each ED. Instantly the line is ½ as long; the voter’s wait is cut in half. By Law four Inspectors are assigned to each ED. Two Inspectors can sit at the table with the ballots and voter cards between them.

In the past, voters have seen long lines, one poll book, and several Inspectors. They wonder – “what are all these people doing, only one Inspector can look for my name in a poll book?” Voters have a right to expect sensible changes, and adjustments to business as usual that focus on serving them efficiently.

The League of Women Voters is known for its Telephone Information Service which for decades has answered voters’ questions and listened to their complaints. Of course we now also use e-mail and social media, but through what ever avenue, voters seek us out and we collect their stories to pass on to the Board of Elections.

Here are several:

26th ED/51st AD (Brooklyn)

The poll site for the voters residing in 260 65th Street was moved from that building to 350 65th Street. While the residing voters were moved, 260 65th Street remains a poll site

for voters from other addresses. This complaint was made by a disabled voter in 260 65th Street, who describes the new site as less accessible to the disabled. (He would prefer to vote in person rather than by absentee ballot.) Why are voters being sent somewhere else, when the building they live in is a poll site?

37th ED/26th AD (Queens)

A voter who arrived at this site, PS 107, 167-02 45th Avenue, Flushing, was redirected to PS 199 at 38-20 48th Avenue, Sunnyside: a distance of more than 4 miles.

The Sunnyside poll site was not the correct site, but the poll worker didn't know to tell the voter that there was no election in the voter's District, but instead, sent the voter to a distant place.

68th ED/74th AD (Manhattan)

A voter told us that at 6:45 AM none of the scanners were working and voters had to drop their ballots in an emergency election box. A poll worker took the voter's ballot and folded it into quarters before inserting it in the box. The voter was alarmed that the ballot would not be scannable.

Schwabe House, 73rd Street and West End Avenue (Manhattan)

A poll worker reported to us that she and her colleagues were so tired and rushing to get out, (car services were waiting outside) and the confusion was so great that nobody could figure out how to close the scanners. She said that she would never work a full day again and pleaded for ½ day shifts.

We appreciate all of the unique challenges that the Board of Elections has faced this year. We thank the Governmental Operations Committee for its continuing leadership, and, as ever, we stand ready to support you both in better serving the voters of the City of New York.