

Voting center plan hotly debated

Idea needs support of both parties; Democrats say shift by primary too rushed

Opinion, A4: Readers comment on the voting centers plan; share your thoughts in a letter to the editor by emailing newsroom@bcdemocrat.com.

By Abbie Gressley For The Democrat

The idea of new voting centers arose at the latest Election Board meeting for the May election, but without the agreement of both Democrat and Republican Parties, the idea couldn't move forward.

For now.

According to the Democrat Party Chairman and members, the Republican Party wanted to fast-track this idea to go from 11 precincts to five Voting Centers all within six weeks.

However, the Republicans argue that the idea has been in the works for far longer.

Brown County Democrat Chairman Justin Schwenk said the conversation began last year in early fall but meetings were canceled. Then the holidays came and everything got off track. He said while it could be possible, with only six weeks left

before early voting begins, it's vital proper laws are followed and public is well informed.

"You'd find the Democrat party willing to support these changes for the county but it's not something we could do in good faith by this primary election," said Schwenk. "The process is supposed to begin with a written plan, and I don't think we've ever seen a written plan."

Schwenk said that following the written plan there should be a public meeting and a 30-day written comment period from the public, then a second public meeting where comments are read and discussed, followed by an election board meeting to provide the final vote. He said the Democratic party does not believe this is how the situation has been handled.

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"We're talking five separate meetings and there's a way to structure those meetings to show you're acting in good faith and give the public the ability to engage and ask questions," said Schwenk. "In their minds, their decision has already been made and it's just 'get out of the way' and that's not democracy. We're going to stand up for our citizens."

However, County Clerk Pearletta Banks said that the last meeting was made public and people were asked to email their questions to her or the Election Board. She said they have not, to date, received any questions from the public. She also said this isn't a sudden decision as they have been discussing this since the previous clerk, Brenda Woods was in office.

"I have been having the discussion about Vote Centers with my election board since my second month in office," Banks said.

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but that's not good enough in the mind of the Democrat party.

"Again, we'd love to support it but want to make sure we have all the plans and information," said Schwenk. "There are just so many questions that need to be answered by the public, by the interested parties, and frankly there's just not enough time to do it for this election."

Schwenk said the further the board takes this without communicating about what they're doing, the more he's going to lose trust in them.

"Whether they bring this topic up for a vote at a County Council meeting or a Commissioners' meeting, or they go ahead and start holding one of the 30-day hearings they're supposed to have, I'd feel they'd be eroding the trust I have in them making sure we're

County Council President Gary Huett said he's not sure what else the Democrats need from them to be ready to put this action into place.

"What's the difference between this election and the next?" said Huett. "I talked to the Democrat Chairman and he said he saw merit in the plan, and I said so what do I need to do for them to come see it for themselves? We're open to that. I'm here to save money and make sure voting is secure."

Huett said it has to be a unanimous vote from the election committee and the Democrats don't seem to want to approve of it. He said at this point, it's up to the Democrats and the council would like to meet their requirements and go from there.

Republican Chairman Mark Bowman said he was and still is in support of the Vote Centers. He said when Rick Kelley was President of the Election Board and initiated the research with Woods, they were on the right track and the process should continue moving forward.

"I don't have anything to say about it," said Bowman.

"It's a mess, and I don't know where it's going to go from here. I'm basically powerless at this point so what I say doesn't matter."

Schwenk said there needs to be a studied committee to have people who understand exactly what the costs and benefits are. He said he imagines there are people in the county who would argue that studies have already been done,

trying to do this thoroughly and after careful consideration," said Schwenk.

Schwenk said he received emails on Jan. 25 that Banks would be holding a public meeting on Jan. 30 at 5:30 p.m. to submit the draft plan for Voting Centers, which is supposed to be created by the Election Board, and ask for a vote on whether or not the draft plan is what they will be going with. He said she would then be asking the Council to vote yes on the plan within 24 hours on Jan. 31 and the Commissioners to vote yes on Feb. 5. Then all she has to do is hold one more Election Board meeting 30 days after Jan. 30 to create the entire plan to have vote centers.

"That is approximately one week before early voting starts," said Schwenk. "So, she is ramming this thing through with a deadline of one week to educate voters before voting starts that we are going to go from 11 precincts to five voting centers."

"You'd find the Democrat party willing to support these changes for the county but it's not something we could do in good faith by this primary election."

Justin Schwenk, Brown County Democrat Chairman On the idea of county voting centers