

Voting locations reviewed

By **Dave S** tafford Brown County Democrat

The early voting site used this year for early voting at Eagle Park might not be used in future elections, and public schools may be enrolled as future voting locations.

Those were a couple of the takeaways from the final meeting of the Brown County Election Board for 2024, as the three-member panel on Dec. 10 discussed the possibility of adopting voting

centers in the future.

The discussion coincided with a review of the 2024 General Election, in which dozens of provisional ballots and approximately 100 ballots cast during early voting were not counted.

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In the case of those rejected from early voting, ballots were rejected largely because the envelopes that voters used to seal their ballots were not signed as required by two authorized poll workers.

“The reason that we had about 100 ballots (rejected after early voting) ... was over the course of 28 days, and over the course of periods of time when there was huge interest and huge anticipation by the voters, and very little patience by the voters ... the absentee board just left out a step (of making sure each envelope had two signatures),” Election Board President and Republican Party representative Mark Williams said.

Williams and board members Pearletta Banks, the county clerk, and Rick Kelley, the appointed Democratic Party member, praised the job of poll workers during early voting and on Election Day.

“We had virtually no issues at the polls and we had a solid election,” Williams said. Kelley suggested that poll workers be surveyed to see if they have ideas to make the process better, but he said overall the parties and poll workers worked together.

“It’s a fair and safe election,” he said.

Banks noted that about half of all ballots cast were cast at early voting in the month before Election Day, and board members seemed to agree that the building at Eagle Park where early voting took place this year won’t be sufficient going forward, particularly because two poll workers must sign ballot envelopes before a voter puts his ballot in the box to be counted.

“The space that we had allocated, however thankful we are to the school board for having that space out at Eagle Park, was too small,” Williams said. “... I think the only solution is to have two sets of clerks — one set of clerks to deliver the ballot and deliver the envelope, and then another set of clerks to receive the ballot back and (sign) the envelope ... so your process is linear.

“And in the little building that we are in out there at Eagle Park, there is not room for another set of clerks,” he said. “... It’s just too small.”

Banks agreed. “I knew that there would be a bigger influx during early voting for the general election versus the primary, but Lord have mercy, I didn’t expect what we had,” she said.

Banks appealed to Commissioner-elect Tim Clark, who was in the audience, for the new incoming board of commissioners to help identify a larger space for early voting in the future.

But Williams also identified another issue that he said led to the approximately 100 early voting ballots being rejected.

“I think that the absentee board would have pulled off early absentee voting without an issue had we not had the additional

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statute that just went into effect for this election that required the envelopes to come back and be signed only after the ballot had been cast,” he said. “I think that’s what created the disruption.”

The board then discussed but did not take any action regarding moving to vote centers in future elections. The majority of Indiana counties are vote center counties, which allow a registered voter to cast a ballot in any voting location in their home county on Election Day.

In Brown County, however, a voter must vote at the precinct polling place where he or she is registered. One Election Day, dozens of voters were turned because they went to the wrong precinct to vote or mistakenly thought they could vote at any precinct.

Williams said it would be up to the election board to initiate a move to election centers, after which public hearings would take place. If the election board were to unanimously support moving to voting centers, the county commissioners would have to approve a plan.

Williams noted that the county has received a \$75,000 grant from the Indiana Secretary of State’s Office to fund additional voting equipment that would be needed if the county moved to voting centers.

“The money’s there as long as we use it,” he said, noting this was part of the reason why a prior effort to move to voting centers failed. “Dollar issues won’t have to be in the mix this time,” he said.

Williams said the county would look to schools to serve as Election Day voting centers, in which case the schools might take an E-learning day or otherwise ensure that voting didn’t interfere with instruction.

“I believe if we go to vote centers, or if in fact, even if we don’t go to vote centers, commencing in 2026, that the polling places should all be located in the public schools,” Williams said, with the possible exception of Church of the Lakes in Nineveh, where school facilities may be lacking.

Brown County School Board President Carol Bowden attended the meeting and said there would be logistical issues to address to get voting equipment and poll workers into the schools.

“It’s additional labor, additional concerns,” Bowden said, that would have to be addressed and negotiated between the county and the schools.