

Brown County Election Board
Presentation to the Brown County Board of Commissioners
January 22, 2025

To be presented during the meeting and a copy hand delivered to each member as well as the County Attorney

Good evening gentlemen.

I am Mark Williams, Chair of the Brown County Election Board. I have with me this evening Rick Kelley, the Democratic member of the board and Pearletta Banks, the County Clerk and, by statute, member of the board and secretary. The Clerk is the one elected official in the County specifically authorized to oversee voter registration and election administration.

I want to discuss four issues with you -- all of them directly connected to Vote Centers and fair and accurate voting administration. I will be brief.

1. On behalf of the voters and the absentee in-person election board, I ask you to provide for an early polling location large enough to accommodate voters, an expanded absentee board and a process by which voters can enter the voting area and pass through stations designed to assure confidentiality, process integrity; and, as a result, a materially reduced number of errors resulting in votes not being counted. There are two areas that to my knowledge are space sufficient: this room, the Salmon Room or the Exhibition Hall at the fairgrounds. The added complexity of the absentee early voting process mandated by the General Assembly together with the increasing number of early voters mandates additional absentee board members and a step-by-step, more linear process with fails safes to assure that we get it right the first time. The current facility is incompatible with such effectiveness or efficiency. And, if the absentee board doesn't get it exactly right, the effect all too often is that the Election Board cannot count the ballot.

2. Many of the current polling places are ADA inadequate and overly congested. This should be an area of concern especially to the Board of Commissioners as IC 3-11-8-6 requires that the county executive shall locate the polls in an accessible and secure facility. The Brown County Board of Education has adopted a 2026 school calendar providing that the school buildings will be closed on Primary and General Election days. The Election Board thank the Superintendent Emily Tracey and the School Board for their cooperation and continued interest in the voting process. So, gentlemen, we now have the opportunity to designate ADA compliant, safe and secure polling places.

3. I go through the first two points to build the foundation for the third: Vote Centers.

Vote Centers offer flexibility and convenience to voters, by allowing them to cast a ballot at any county vote center location of their choosing on Election Day. The law requires at least 2 vote centers in Brown County -- one for each 10,000 registered voters. Using the three elementary schools, the high school and the Church of the Lakes (a compliant location) we could cover the county.

The process is first for me to obtain from each of you and the County Council resolutions of support as to the concept of Vote Centers. While Vote Centers might reduce overall expenses there may well be additional costs such as the acquisition and maintenance of additional equipment and the need to safely and securely store all of the equipment.

To be sure, there is no specific plan in place as to what voting equipment to be used. But I must tell you that at our January Election Board Meeting, Mr. Kelly and I went on record in favor of not discontinuing hand-marked paper ballot cards in the event Vote Centers were adopted.

I make these points to inform you that, in my opinion, reducing expenses is not a good reason to move to vote centers (although that may be a result) the only good reason to move to vote centers is to make the voting process marginally more convenient to the voters. (You must weigh whether the added convenience outweighs the inherent disruption and confusion that such a fundamental change will make.)

If you and the Council both adopt resolutions of support for Vote Centers, the Election Board would hold appoint a study committee who would gauge public opinion and develop a vote center plan. This committee would be diverse. I believe that representatives from the Commissioners and the Council -- or their designees should be members. I believe that the two central committee chairs should each appoint 1 representative and that representatives of two civic organizations interested in good government should be appointed by the Board.

It would be the job of this group to develop by majority vote a preliminary Vote Center Plan. IC 3-11-18.1-4 provides in detail the elements of such a plan. Any plan must specify the technology and the voting methods to be used. The statute is detailed down to requiring a sketch of the proposed layout of a proposed vote center.

This preliminary plan would then be published and the committee would hold a public meeting for comment. After the public's opinions are received, the committee will then reconvene and determine if any amendments to the plan are necessary as a result of public comment. There is then a final hearing to advise the public of the final plan. Which is then submitted to the Election Board for an up or down unanimous vote. If the vote is in the affirmative the plan will be submitted to the State Election Division and we will move forward with vote centers.

4. Now, if you like our voting equipment and voting methods and the idea of using the schools and Church of the Lakes as polling places but you are not convinced that the dislocation of the Vote Center process is necessary, I have a compromise: you as a board designate the four schools and the church as polling places. The Election Board, by unanimous vote, can then, under authority of IC 3-11-8-4-3: consolidate the location of Jackson 1-4 at Helmsburg School; consolidate Hamblen 1 and 2 at Spurnica School; use the Church as the polling place for the lakes community; and, consolidate Washington 1-3 to the high school; and, finally, using the Van Buren School for Van Buren 1. We would use our current equipment and voting methods; plus, we could, by authority of the previously mentioned statute reduce the number of required precinct officers.

Do you have any questions about any of this discussion? I'm willing to come back.

Thank you.