

Cheshire Elections Department – Elections, COVID, and the 2020-2021 budget

Before the current crisis, the Elections Department budget was expected to remain relatively flat, with a few alterations to meet the needs of a busy year containing an August primary for state and federal offices and the November presidential election.

The Elections Department manages elections for the town's 19,400+ voters; maintains voting records (e.g. registrations, removals, changes); answers individual and general inquiries about the voting process for the public; provides information to political parties and candidates upon request; and arranges training and certification for the elections workers we employ.

Four major tasks, some of them annual, had just been completed when regular hours at Town Hall were suspended: an unprecedented volume of primary deadline registrations and changes; canvass of voters by mail; investigation of over 800 possible voter status changes provided by the interstate Electronic Registration Information Center (ERIC); and material preparations, scheduling, and staffing for the original April primary date.

Since then, staff has been working in the office individually on a staggered schedule. Registrations, removals, changes, and inquiries about voter status or affiliation require use of Connecticut's Centralized Voter Registration System (CVRS), which cannot be accessed from home for security reasons. Email traffic is monitored and responded to from home, unless CVRS is required. The registrars are in daily contact with each other and participate in weekly conference calls with the Secretary of the State (SOTS) and the Director of Elections. Like the town, state authorities are evaluating the COVID situation on a week-by-week basis and we monitor their directives from home.

The office operates with a statutory minimum required by CGS title 9: two registrars and two deputies. As elections approach, what is required of the office increases exponentially. Depending upon the type of election, staffing for each event typically requires 60-80 poll workers. On April 17, the governor postponed the presidential preference primary until August 11, effectively combining it with the state and federal primary that day. Consequently, our town saved \$10-13k that would have been required to hold the presidential primary alone in fiscal year 2019-2020 (exact amount of savings impossible to estimate without knowing what measures would have been required to hold a primary safely in emergency conditions).

The costs detailed in our 2020-2021 budget will remain as described until such time as we have direction from the state regarding public safety protocols.

- The federal government has allocated \$5m to Connecticut for COVID-related election assistance. At this time, disbursement totals to individual towns are not available.
- The cost of safety equipment is unknown at this time. The state is formulating guidelines and we monitor their progress through weekly conference calls with the Secretary of the State. SOTS has informed us not to expect much help in obtaining safety equipment – that is currently the responsibility of individual municipalities. SOTS has also suggested that safety protocols may include additional workers assigned specifically to cleaning duties.

- Consolidation of polling places is being considered by SOTS. All polling places must normally be opened for primaries, but allowing a central venue or fewer polling sites could reduce costs, as well as streamline safety requirements.
- Any small reduction allowed by SOTS in the usual number of poll workers will be offset by workers needed for an expected increase in the number of absentee ballots.

Presidential election years are busy in Cheshire in the best of times. Turnout in 2016 was 87% and, depending on circumstances, we may meet or exceed that in November. We hope that you will support us by guaranteeing the resources necessary to provide the town's voters with the safest election possible.