



**Remarks of Langdon D. Neal, Chairman  
Board of Election Commissioners for the City of Chicago  
November 1, 2013**

Chairman Austin and Members of the Chicago City Council:

My name is Langdon D. Neal, and I am the Chairman of the Board of Election Commissioners for the City of Chicago. With me today are: the Board's Executive Director, Lance Gough; Assistant Executive Director Kelly Bateman; Chief Legal Counsel James M. Scanlon; Communications Director James P. Allen; and Human Resources Director Peter Peso.

On behalf of the Board of Election Commissioners, I thank you for the opportunity to be here today.

The coming year marks one of the busiest in our four-year election cycle. As you know, the Election Board will be conducting three citywide elections in the span of 11 months. In 2014, the Election Board will conduct two citywide elections – the March 18 Primary Election and the November 4 General Election. At the same time, the Election Board will be managing various projects related to candidates filing their nominating petitions and objections for the February 2015 Municipal Election.

Equally important, we will be introducing a wave of new technology to improve voter services in 2014. In each instance, the technology is designed to make voting more accessible and simpler. During my remarks, I will refer to a planning document that we have supplied to the City Council. The document is titled “Infrastructure Projects and Changes in Election Administration: Evaluations and Recommendations for 2013-2015.” In this document, the Election Board produced a long-range and comprehensive outline of what changes have occurred in the Election Code, what additional changes we can expect, how these changes are affecting our operations, and what mission-critical technology upgrades we must undertake.

Briefly and bluntly, the report says this: conducting elections is growing more complex and more expensive every year. That is why I will be talking about three important initiatives coming in 2014: (1) a more robust and flexible web-site platform; (2) a new Voter Registration Database/Election Management System; and, (3) an Electronic Poll Book solution.

I will return to those topics in a moment, but first, there are some important items to share.

Since we last spoke, we had a very successful General Election in November 2012. As energized as Chicago voters were in 2008, we saw an even higher percentage of voter turnout in 2012. Even with *five fewer days* of Early Voting, Chicago voters cast roughly the same number of ballots in 2012 Early Voting as they did in 2008 Early Voting.

With the help of many in this room, the Election Board successfully re-mapped all wards and precincts ahead of that momentous election. We also worked to consolidate precincts with the goal of long-term budget savings. We now have about 20 percent fewer precincts than we had four years ago.

This precinct consolidation will yield long-term and lasting cost savings. For the City, the savings will impact the 2015 Budget. That is when the City will be responsible for costs related to renting polling places, training and hiring election judges, equipment cartage, and other costs that will be reduced thanks to our sweeping precinct consolidation.

Another piece of good news is that eight months from now, Illinois will join the ranks of Indiana, Arizona and many other states who offer online voter registration. Offering secure online registration not only makes life easier for voters, but also makes for more accurate voter rolls and reduced processing costs for taxpayers.

The Chicago Election Board was among the jurisdictions who championed this cause. You may recall that Chicago's was the first election agency in Illinois to offer the next closest thing to online registration. Last fall, we created a system where voters could submit their information online and then receive pre-printed registration forms in the mail, so that they could sign the forms and return them.

We took this step in response to what we heard from voters in late 2011. That was when we convened a diverse and massive cross-section of civic and community organizations at the UIC Forum. The event was called “Voter Engagement: 2012.” It was one of the biggest election focus groups ever. There, the audience brainstormed about what each of us – as voters and election administrators – might be able to do differently or better to improve participation and turnouts.

Among the groups’ top priorities: online registration for new voters and for those who need to update their address.

So, we relayed that message to leadership in Springfield. As soon as legislation for online registration was introduced, the Chicago Election Board began contributing information on what details the ideal registration system might include. Specifically, the system should verify the online registrants’ identities through Social Security numbers, Driver’s License numbers and State ID numbers. For this reason, it was vital to have the support and participation of the Secretary of State’s Office, because it is that Office’s database that will be used to verifying the voters’ identities. The Secretary of State’s Office’s system also will produce the signatures for the new and updated registrations. This team approach led last spring to the General Assembly passing, and the Governor signing, landmark legislation for online registration. This new system is scheduled to begin serving Illinois voters in July 2014.

We know from our peers in Indiana and Arizona that this system will deliver real convenience to voters, but also substantial cost savings to taxpayers. In Arizona, the average cost of processing a paper form was calculated at 83 cents, compared to 3 cents for an electronic registration.

There's another piece of good news. The Election Code changed to allow those who are 17 years old to register and vote in the 2014 Primary if they will turn 18 by the Nov. 4 General Election. This gives us a wonderful opportunity to register tens of thousands of students in January and February – before they head off to colleges, trade schools or the workforce in the fall of 2014.

The Chicago Election Board is leading the way for a massive outreach to this new crop of voters. We are working with Mikva Challenge, the McCormick Foundation, the Chicago Public Schools, the Archdiocese, independent schools, the League of Women Voters, Rock the Vote, the Illinois Coalition for Immigrant and Refugee Rights and various other voter-registration organizations to register as many students as possible between Jan. 1 and Feb. 18, 2014 ahead of the March 18 Primary Election.

Now I'd like to return to discussing the challenges ahead.

As I noted before, our infrastructure report detailed how changes in the Election Code are making elections much more difficult, complex and costly.

For example, in March, there will be a significant liberalization of how provisional ballots shall be counted. Under the old rules, provisional ballots cast in the wrong precincts could not be counted at all. Under the new rules, provisional ballots cast in the wrong precinct can be counted for various offices: federal offices, statewide offices, countywide offices, citywide offices, and various district offices (Congress, State Senate and State Representative) where the ballot offers the same contests as the voter would have seen in his or her home precinct. This will mean creating a complicated system for re-making provisional ballots to account for the portions of each ballot that can and cannot be counted.

Also, the laws that set the schedules for Early Voting and Grace Period Voting schedules have changed. Those programs now run through the Saturday before Election Day. This complicates the effort of preparing the latest voter-participation reports delivered to our judges in 2,069 precincts before the polls open at 6 a.m. on Tuesday.

Additionally, we have seen bills that call for extending the Early Voting and Grace Period programs through the Monday before Election Day, as well as bills to require that register voters in the polling places on Election Day. Comparable programs are already growing common in other Midwest states. If history is a guide – and I believe it is – it is only a matter of time before these bills will be re-introduced and become part of the Illinois Election Code. When they do, the voters will have more options, and we'll have more work.

Mindful of these changes, the Board of Election Commissioners prepared a long-range Infrastructure Plan and identified three mission-critical projects that we must address:

(1) A more flexible and powerful website: The November 2012 election presented twin challenges – the redistricting of all wards and precincts, and a crushing influx of inquiries from voters on their smart phones, tablet devices, laptops, personal computers and our text-message system. The new ward lines in Chicago meant that precinct boundaries across the City had changed – right before the high-turnout Presidential Election. We will now have a more robust web site platform on a secure and expandable cloud system with flexibility to grow to meet demand. Additionally, we must offer new online systems for voters to apply for absentee ballots completely online, without a paper form.

(2) A new Voter Registration/Election Management System: The VR/EMS database is the backbone of all of the Election Board's operations: precinct assignments, poll sheets, ballot applications, ballot styles, ballot printing, polling places, equipment designations, election judges and the recording of voting history. The move to a SQL 2012 platform will make our system more secure and robust. The resulting system also will enhance our ability to coordinate records with the Illinois Voter Registration System (IVRS) and the coming online registration system. Although we heard estimates that this system might cost \$2 million, we are developing this system using our own staff and a contractor for \$400,000.

(3) Electronic Poll Books: These laptop computer devices will link every polling place to a central computer so that there is real-time assistance and data flow to help our judges with accurate, consistent and uniform instructions for every voter.

I want to focus especially on the importance of this last item. In March 2014, Chicago will be joining several urban, suburban and rural jurisdictions across the country who are beginning to utilize electronic poll books. The reason is simple: elections are far more complex, and we must equip our election judges with the tools and technology to be able to assist each and every voter.

Electronic Poll Books will help us assure that our judges can give consistent, uniform, complete and accurate instructions to every voter, in every situation, in every precinct – even if they're in the wrong precinct.

Under the old system our judges only had 600 paper ballot applications for the voters who were registered in that particular precinct. If a voter came to a polling place and if that voter wasn't among those 600 on the rolls in that precinct, the judges had no ability to re-direct the voter.

With electronic poll books, the judges in each polling place will have real-time access to a robust file of all 1.6 million active and inactive voter registrations in Chicago.



This means that:

If the voter is in the correct precinct and there is no ID requirement, the judge will be able to process the voter quickly. The poll book also will remind the judge of the correct ballot style for that voter.

If there is a question about that voter's registration or if there is a need for ID, the system will tell the judges how to process that voter and what types of ID are acceptable.

If the voter shows up in Precinct 1 and belongs in Precinct 2, the judges can provide the address for Precinct 2 and print out a map.

If the voter needs to cast a provisional ballot, the judges will have the ability to log all necessary information to help prevent that voter from being disenfranchised.

If the voter moved within the precinct – or moved to another precinct – or moved from the suburbs into the City – the judge will have the right instructions for every possible scenario. And the poll books will be connected to a network to help prevent voters from casting ballots at more than one site.

If a registration arrives or is processed in the two weeks before Election Day, the electronic poll books everywhere will be updated and reflect that new registration or the change in the record.

If a voter has already cast a ballot in Early Voting or Absentee Voting and then shows up on Election Day, the poll books will tell the judges. There will be no need to worry about whether stickers were delivered in time, and whether the judges placed each sticker on the correct corresponding paper ballot application before the polls open at 6 a.m.

In short, our election judges in each and every one of the City's 2,069 precincts will have state-of-the-art tools to help any Chicago voter with any question.

The poll books also will provide us with a log so that we can monitor voter participation throughout the day at any precinct or the entire City. We will have real-time access to turnout data. We will be able to monitor for any trends that might signal the need for assistance at a polling place. And we will be able to devote more resources to resolving the more complex problems that might surface on Election Day. We also anticipate being able to streamline the process of recording voter history, reducing that process from several weeks to perhaps one week or less.

I am very pleased to report to you that the Mayor's Office and the Office of Budget and Management have committed \$800,000 toward this effort in each of the next two years. I am also very pleased to advise you that we are committed to providing voters with the most affordable and high-quality system possible.

In addition to working on the technology and infrastructure of the office, the Election Board also has worked on the following projects in recent months:

- We completed the mapping of every voter record and precinct into the new County Board Districts,
- We completed a mail canvasses and performed related efforts aimed at cleansing and updating the voter rolls,
- And, we completed the Special Primary and Special Election to fill the vacancy in office Second Congressional District.

On this last item, we are working with the Office of Budget and Management to complete transfers, as these elections were not anticipated and were not part of our 2013 Budget.

Looking ahead, the Mayor's 2014 budget recommendation for the Board of Election Commissioners for the City of Chicago is \$11,875,547, plus \$800,000 in Automation Funding for the Electronic Poll Books for a total of \$12,675,547.

In comparing election budgets, 2010 is the most recent and comparable year in our four-year cycle. The appropriation for 2010 was \$13,053,045. The Mayor's 2014 budget recommendations for the Chicago Election will represent a decrease of \$377,498, or 2.89% from the 2010 appropriation.

Notably, in addition to this reduction, the 2014 budget is different from the 2010 appropriation in the following areas:

- In 2010, rent expenses of \$500,000 for the Board's offices at 69 W. Washington were part of the Central Services (Fleet & Facility Management) budget. Starting in 2014, those expenses are part of the Election Board budget.
- In 2010, the Board saved \$600,000 through unpaid furlough days.

When the rent and furlough items are considered, the 2014 budget for the Election Board represents a net decrease of \$1,477,498, or 11.32%, from the 2010 appropriation.

Given the growing complexity of election administration, this presented a serious challenge. We were able to meet this challenge through significant reductions in Personnel Services, Postage, Court Reporting, Professional and Technical Services, Advertising, Rental of Equipment, Mobile Telephones, Transportation and Expense Allowances.

In closing, we appreciate the Administration's understanding of the need to invest in new technology. These technologies not only ensure better services to voters, but long-term savings to the City. This new wave of technology also is critical to ensuring that we administer elections that are accessible, transparent, impartial and accurate – for every voter in the City of Chicago.

We also appreciate the need for frugality and will continue to work with the City and the County on ways to deliver services as efficiently as possible.

On behalf of the Board of Election Commissioners, I thank you for your consideration of the Election Board's requests and look forward to answering your questions.

